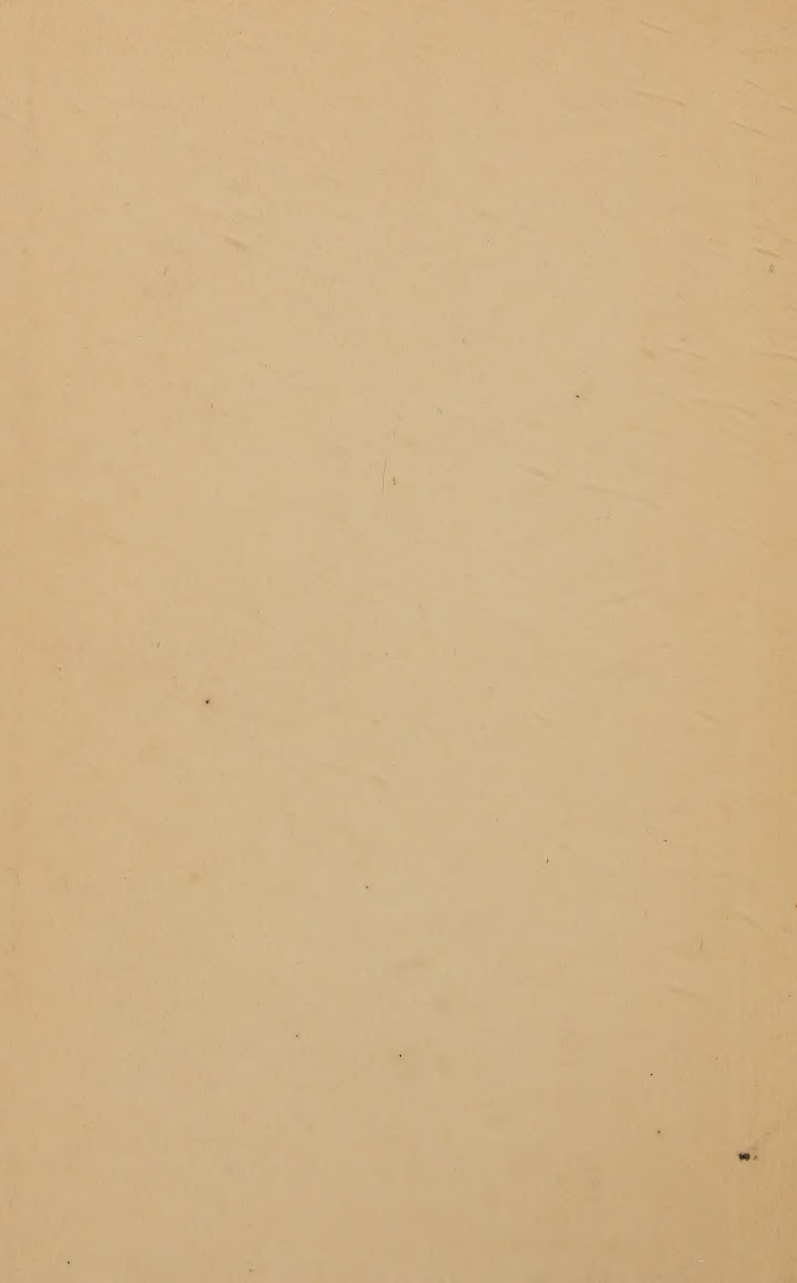


THE LADY
OF
THE SPUR

DAVID POTTER





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THE LADY OF THE SPUR

THE LADY OF THE SPUR

BY
DAVID POTTER

WITH A FRONTISPIECE BY
CLARENCE F. UNDERWOOD



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TO
JANE GREY POTTER

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THE LADY OF THE SPUR

I

AT POLE TAVERN

THE Pole Tavern was not a place I would have chosen to refresh myself in could I have had my way—the Gloucester Road was too public for a man who would as lief not be looked at too closely—but my horse and I were tired, it was almost dark, and I had had nothing to eat since morning. Moreover, it was hereabouts I had named the rendezvous for Link, although, to be sure, I had counted upon his meeting me in the open.

What with one thing and another, when I cantered from the crossroad onto the highway, and heard the tavern sign creak fair above my head, I yielded to its enticement.

I confess the enticement was the better enforced by the flutter of a gray petticoat at the door—a maid was just then returning from some errand. It was many a day since I had seen such a slim waist, such well-rounded hips, and such a merry pair of Irish eyes.

"A fine evening, Bridget," I said as I dismounted.

"Yes, sur—a fine evenin', sur." Her eyes challenged mine. "My name's Peggy, not Bridget, please. Peggy O'Connor."

"Peggy, of course. I don't suppose you'd be willing to change the last part of your name, Peggy?"

"That depends on who does the askin' me, sur."

"There's a man not more than a mile from you who has it on his mind at this very minute."

"Sure it's likely to be a heavy load for a weak support then."

"Ah, you're too much for me, Peggy." I pointed to a comfortable coach that stood before the door, the horses not yet brought round. "Whose turnout is that?"

"That's Mr. Hancock's, sur. I've just been after gettin' a blanket from it, to wrap a hot brick in for the old gentleman's feet."

"Mr. Hancock?"

"Yes, sur, Mr. William Hancock, from below here—from Morvan way, I'm thinkin'."

Morvan? I pricked up my ears in earnest. "Mr. William Hancock of Morvan township! Oh,

yes, I remember him now, of course. Well, Peggy, if I stop for supper, will you wait on me yourself? ”

“ That must be for the master to say,” retorted the girl. “ Sure, I’m willin’ enough. I’ll send you the hostler, sur.” With a laugh she slipped into the house, leaving me to follow at my leisure.

I avoided the common room and ordered supper to be served me in the tavern parlor. But to my disappointment it was not Peggy but the landlord himself who waited upon me.

It was when I had finished my oysters and cider and was spreading the *Whig Gazette* for a few minutes reading, that Boniface whispered the words that gave me such a damnable start.

“ I see you’ve shaved your moustache, Cap’n, but I don’t think you’ll find the Jerseys very healthy for you, even yet.”

A gentleman was engaged at supper at a table by the window-seat. I managed to keep the *Gazette* held at fist’s-end between him and me, as I half-turned my head to Boniface.

“ Were you addressing me? ”

The fellow smirked. “ Yes, Cap’n. Take a friend’s advice and ride west to-night. It ain’t likely to be pleasant for you here. You can be safe

across the river in a couple of hours, if you can still ride like you used to."

"What the devil! Who do you think I am, man?"

"That's all right, Cap'n—I'm a friend. Don't think I'm going to blow on you." He supported himself by one hand on the table and leaned his puffy face toward mine. "Lord! Cap'n, I knowed you right off. You ain't a bit stouter than you was when I last seen you—the very night you was took. You're a little more tanned, may be—we heard you'd gone over the mountains—but that don't hurt your good looks none. Your gettin' rid of your moustache does change you considerable, but I'd know you anywhere."

I turned my back on the window table, and faced the fellow fair.

"Have you been drinking too much of your own applejack?" I demanded.

His blue-veined cheeks and reddened eyes expressed admiration no less than reproach. "You always was a good one," he grinned, "if you *was* so young for the business. Good Lord! don't you know *me*, Cap'n? I'm Bill—Bill Evans, who used to be hostler at Mullen's above Trenton. I was at

Mullen's the night you was lagged for going through the foreigner—the British dook or whatever he was. I was always mighty sorry you didn't get away. I'm married now and settled down respectable—you see I'm landlord here, on my way up in the world—but I don't blow on old friends. No, sir."

He paused—his puffy cheeks hardened, and his eyes met mine steadily. "Understand, though, Cap'n, I'm through with the starlight business. I've got a wife and children. No nonsense around Pole Tavern, while I'm landlord. After supper, you'd better ride west."

"You talk like a madman," I said. "Who the devil do you take me for?"

His face again took on a look of very hearty admiration. "The same young fox, ain't you? You always was a smart one! Who do I take you for?" He favored me with a knowing wink, and made as if to thrust me familiarly in the ribs. My frown checked him. "Why, I take you for who you are. Pshaw! Cap'n, it's all on the wall there."

My eyes followed the significant jerk of his chin. The postrider had that day fastened a handbill on the rear wall of the tavern parlor—I could

fancy half a dozen such flaunting in the common room! I read it with an interest that I believe I managed to conceal. The words at the top of the accursed sheet were in bold black letters—

“TOM BELL!”

Text in smaller type ran below this superscription.

“Whereas, certain robberies by force and violence on the public ways have occurred of late, said robberies being plainly the acts of a practised hand: and, Whereas, one Tom Bell, so called, has been noticed directing himself toward the confines of this State, the same being contrary to the terms of the pardon granted after the quondam trial and conviction for highway robbery of the said Tom Bell, so called: Therefore, the officers of the law of the State, namely, all sheriffs, sheriffs’ deputies, bailiffs, constables, and officers of every sort, are hereby authorized to apprehend, arrest, and deliver the person of the said Tom Bell, so called, as a notorious highwayman and vagrant, wheresoever found within the confines of the State. All good citizens will assist the officers of the law when summoned so to do.”

This pleasing proclamation was signed by His Excellency the Governor. A description followed.

“The said Tom Bell when convicted was of the height of sixty-nine inches, of a slender habit of body, and clear complexion tending to brown. Eyes and moustache the same.

He is now about eight-and-twenty years of age. He always dressed smartly, and had a very genteel appearance. His language and manners the same."

By the time I had read and reread the bill I had myself perfectly in hand. I burst out laughing so heartily that the landlord stared amazed, and the gentleman at the window table glanced our way.

I clapped Boniface on the shoulder. "Well, well, man! So that's what all this gabble is about! You took me for Tom Bell, did you? That's good—good, by George!" I affected to study the hand-bill again. "That description of the fellow does make us alike as two peas in a pod. Small wonder you were fooled. Ha, ha!"

The landlord stared, nonplussed. His face fell, and he made me an awkward bow. "I beg your pardon, sir. I hadn't seen Tom Bell for so long, I thought sure you was him. I hope you'll overlook it. I have to be careful about the house's reputation. My business——"

"There, there!" I interrupted, "I don't care to hear about your business, man. Just let the matter be a warning to you not to be too hasty in renewing your old acquaintance—with highwaymen. That would be most like to kill your reputation—

may be yourself. The dog was hanged along with the wolf!—You understand?”

“Yes, sir,” said the fellow humbly enough.

He bowed again and was turning away when I detained him. “By the way, whose coach was that I saw outside?”

“Mr. Hancock’s, sir.”

“Oh—of Morvan township?”

“Yes, sir. The small gentleman with gray hair, at the other table there.”

At a glance I took in the “small gentleman with gray hair”—his fat, stupid face, his self-important cock of the head.

“Of course, of course,” I said. “I hadn’t noticed him. Mr. William Hancock.”

“Yes, sir,” piped Boniface. “And I hope you’ll forget my mistake, sir. Will you stop with us to-night, sir? I can make you comfortable, I’m sure, Mr.——”

“Mr. Morvan,” I said. The landlord’s eyes opened wide, but I gave him no chance to speak. “You may as well set aside a room for me, although I’m not likely to stay all night. I merely expect my business agent here.”

“Yes, sir. All right, Mr. Morvan. I’ll air

the cherry room at once, sir. A very pretty view in the daytime over the cherry orchard, Mr. Morvan."

"That will do," I said. "Ah, wait a moment. Mr. Hancock, there, may have news of my agent."

The small gentleman at the window table had been discussing a bowl of something hot, merrily enough, although he had but himself for company. Indeed, he had begun to sing a lively catch.

"Says General Andy Jackson:

'For gentlemen's satisfaction,

Here's pistols and here's rifles very handy;

But don't let it alarm ye

That once I led the army—

I lead the Constitution now,' says Andy."

Assuming my frankest air, I approached deliberately. He ceased his song, and eyed me with curiosity. I bowed.

"Mr. William Hancock, I take it, sir."

He gave me bow for bow. "Yes, sir—the same, sir."

"Of Morvan township?"

"Quite right, sir. At your service." By this time he had risen to his feet, a trifle over-carefully.

"I believe you have the advantage of me, sir.

Your face is familiar, but your name has somehow escaped me for the moment."

"No wonder," I said laughing. "It's rare testimony to the air of West Jersey that you remember even my face. By George, Mr. Hancock! a man thirty years younger might be proud of such a pair of eyes. You know my face at once, though I think you haven't seen me since I was a baby."

"Ha!" said the old gentleman, plainly delighted with my compliment. "You flatter me, sir—you flatter me, I'm sure, though, to be honest with you, I *can* see a woodcock over the sights of a Manton as well as ever I could. But what do you say? I haven't seen you since you were a baby?"

"I suppose I couldn't have been above five or six years old when I was last at the Manor."

"Eh? What! You don't say so! Henry Morvan!"

"Just arrived from the Missouri."

"Well, well!" He shook my hand heartily. "We heard you were coming about this time to—ah—to claim your patrimony at last, eh? Time you were settling down, you young rascal! Very proper, I'm sure."

“I would have wagered you wouldn’t know me, sir.”

“Certainly—I’d have known you anywhere, anywhere. You have the Morvan look—decidedly the Morvan look. Yes, I’ve pretty good eyes for sixty-five, as you say. Hum! yes, Stockton said he was expecting you any day—told me so only last week, I remember—had a letter from you a month or so ago, wasn’t it? Yes, yes, I’d have recognized you anywhere. I’m not such an old man yet, as you were so flattering as to say.”

He shook my hand again, patting me on the shoulder with such good will that I felt a little ashamed of myself.

As we exchanged compliments I kept the tail of my eye on the landlord, Evans. I breathed more easily. My stratagem had succeeded—respectful interest only showed in the landlord’s mottled face.

“You may get the room ready for me, my man,” I ordered.

“And Evans, see if the horses are buckled to yet,” said Mr. Hancock.

“Yes, sir. Yes, gentlemen, at once, sir.” He hustled out, and I turned to my new acquaintance.

"You're to stay all night, I take it," said the old gentleman. "I'm sorry I'm just about to leave, else I'd ask you to join me in a glass of spiced bumbo."

"You're surely not for home to-night," I hazarded.

"No, worse luck! That is," he corrected himself pompously, "I'm always willing to do my duty. I have the honor to serve as coroner for the county, Mr. Morvan. I'm on my way to Clayville now."

"In your official capacity, I take it, sir."

"Yes, exactly—in my official capacity, Mr. Morvan. I'll just take a last glass before starting." He drained the punch as he spoke, without even the formality of offering me a drop of it. "Hum! very refreshing! Yes, sir—in my official capacity, as someone has put it. A body has been found near Clayville. The black rascal who brought me word—confound it! I was to have a teal for supper, too, teal with a bottle of my 1800. The messenger said it was somebody killed by highwaymen, but I'll wager his head's been turned by this news of Tom Bell's being hereabouts again. Ten to one the corpse is only a poor devil of a bound boy smothered in the brick-kilns."

The old gentleman might have harangued me an hour on end, had not the landlord thrust his head in the door and announced that the coach was waiting.

"I'm coming, Evans," cried Mr. Hancock. "I'm coming, my good fellow. I hope your hostler has a lantern—your floor is confoundly uneven. Good-night, Mr. Morvan. I'm sorry you're not going my way—I'd be glad of your company a dark night like this. I'll see you in Morvan in a day or two, no doubt. I'm sorry I can't stay to enjoy your company, Mr. Morvan. Do you know the new song?

"'But don't let it alarm ye

That once I led the army—

I lead the Constitution now,' says Andy."

He jammed his hat on his head, and walked out with an air that seemed to be trying to combine his sense of official dignity with his feeling that he was a devil of a fellow.

II

THE CHERRY ROOM

IN the hall behind the tavern parlor, I encountered Peggy, myrtle-berry candle in hand.

"I was just comin' to show you to your room, sur," she said. "I've aired it fine for you,—the cherry room."

"Lead on, Lady Macbeth! Lead cherry lips to cherry room!"

She smiled back at me as we began to ascend the staircase. "You're a lighthearted gentleman."

"Why shouldn't I be?"

"True for you, sur—a laughing man for me, every day in the week. All the Morvans are that. You're Squire Henry Morvan, the master says."

"How do you know the Morvans are lighthearted, Peggy?"

"I've seen Mr. Bram Morvan here, more than once."

"I'll wager you have."

"Oh, I'm not sayin' he don't have a word or two for me, when he does come, but it's not often

after all. Mostly he puts up at Merry's Tavern—that's nearer to Morvan Manor, you see—though master, here, don't think much of Bat Merry. But Mr. Bram Morvan, *he's* merry enough himself, that's sure."

"The devil he is!" I thought to myself.

By this time we had entered the cherry room. A cherry-wood table, with writing materials thereon, occupied the middle. Curtains of white muslin hung at the windows, and the glow of the candle, as Peggy set it on the table, showed a cherry-wood bed in an alcove.

"Thank you, Peggy," I said. "I expect a visitor at any minute. As soon as he comes, show him up."

"Yes, sur."

She made no move to go, however, but stood looking up at me, her eyes dancing.

"Well?" I asked.

"Well!" she mocked.

I looked at the inviting mouth. "Oh, ho!" I cried. "Is that it, my pretty rogue!"

She eluded my motion, and ran laughing to the door. "No, no. You're too late now, sur. You're no real Morvan, after all—Mr. Bram

wouldn't have needed to be told to kiss a girl good-night!"

"The devil he wouldn't!" This time I spoke my thought aloud, but Peggy had already vanished.

I disposed myself as comfortably as possible. I had little to do save to wait for an hour or two on the chance that Link, since he had missed me on the road, would be sharp enough to seek me at this, the nearest public house.

I began to wonder if the half-breed had carried to a happy end the errand upon which I had despatched him: My directions had been as plain as I could make them—to strike straight southeast from Gloucester to the outer curve of May's Point; thence on by a maze of foot-paths to the island in the marshes where my little hunting-lodge had stood, long ago. I counted much on its still standing—on the little knoll above the sea, amidst the red cedars and the holly, where years might pass and only the wild-ducks or the wilder cattle, or fox or muskrat, would ever discover me.

It was true that Link was new to this part of the world, but a man who had guided us—Henry Morvan and me—through the Missouri wilderness,

was not likely to be confused in West Jersey, little less wild though it was.

I resolved to wait an hour or so, then, if Link were not yet at hand, to push on alone to the lodge. I would travel by night as much as possible, for my recent encounter with the *ci-devant* hostler, Evans, was clear proof that I was easily to be recognized by one who had once known me well.

That had been a lucky thought—to impose myself upon Mr. Hancock as Henry Morvan. But for that I might have been laid by the heels, by this time, or at best have been riding for the river and safety. Poor Morvan! He would have been first to cry: “*Encore!*” to my pretty trick. But never again would I hear that cheery voice—Henry Morvan was asleep on a green bluff above the Missouri.

I arose, walked to the white-curtained window, and stared out into the night. Even through the leaded window-panes, I could hear the freshening wind sighing among the cherry-trees below.

The wind had sighed more mournfully the night Henry Morvan died. River fever had taken him in a day and a night. He had only had time for a brief talk with me before delirium racked his mind, and the fire of his disease scorched his weary body. I

had buried the best friend I had ever had in that green bend of the river.

From his talks with me I had gleaned the three names—his cousin, Bram Morvan, who was now the heir, the family lawyer, Mr. Thomas Stockton, and the family friend, Mr. William Hancock. This information was little enough. As it chanced, also, my acquaintance in West Jersey had been with the counties that lie nearest the sea, so that I had never seen Morvan Manor.

On the whole, it was a stroke of pure luck that Mr. Hancock's self-conceit, aided by the liquor he had drunk and my own chance resemblance to Henry Morvan, had given me the opportunity to put to sleep the landlord's lingering suspicions.

The wind, sighing, tapped a great bough against the pane. My friend was dead—his name had served my purpose of the moment—there was nothing left for me to do for him but to send a letter to Mr. Stockton, giving him the proofs of Henry Morvan's death. Only a month before, as I knew, Morvan had written the lawyer that he was on the point of coming home—I hoped the man of business was not too musty to feel some sorrow at his wealthy client's sudden death.

As for Mr. William Hancock—if he remembered to-morrow—and I doubted it—that he had met a live Henry Morvan to-night, he would be too distrustful of himself to make mention of the fact—he must also remember that he had drunk a deal too much hot punch!

The Morvan name was known here at Pole Tavern—Boniface would make sure a letter and package would reach the family lawyer—I would write at once. Afterward I would press on to my refuge in the marsh-islands. After all, it was homesickness that had brought me back to the Jerseys—that and the wish to make sure Morvan's family received proper notice of his death.

I snuffed the candle until the scent of the myrtle-berry was less heavy in the room. Then I cut a quill to my liking, and bent over my task.

At that moment, there was a tap at the door behind me. Peggy's voice answered to my loud: "Come in!"

"Your visitor's here, sur, if you please."

"Show him in!" I said. "And don't let anyone disturb us, Peggy."

A light step entered the room, and the door closed. I heard Peggy retiring down the stairway.

“ Well, Link,” I said without turning my head. “ Come around where I can see you. I began to think you’d lost yourself in a cranberry bog, man.”

There was no answer, but the light step sounded again. I cocked my mind’s ear! The lightness of the Indian’s tread was there, but not its stealthiness.

I turned my head sharply. A strange figure—a figure not Link’s!—stood in the shadow beyond the candle’s gleam.

With an oath, I was on my feet, a pistol instant in my hand. “ Who are you, sir?” I snatched up the candle, and presented pistol and it together, to the intruder’s very face. “ I’m not to be taken so! Who are you, sir?”

“ Madam, not sir, if you please,” said a voice, half-laughing, half-trembling.

I stood agape—my pistol to the head of a woman—a woman slender, graceful, and heavily veiled.

III

THE LADY OF THE SPUR

I SLIPPED my weapon into the flap of my riding-coat, placed the candle on the table, and stared again at my strange visitor. She drew a quick breath—as if happy that the black muzzle no longer yawned upon her—and moved toward a chair, plainly expecting an invitation to be seated.

I eyed her. She was almost certainly young, very possibly pretty, but the heavy black veil, wound twice about face and hat, hid not only her features but her very hair.

“Your pardon for the pistol, madam,” I said. “I took you for a different sort of visitor.”

“Peggy told me you were expecting someone,” she answered in a low voice. “She led me up here before I could explain—could send you word that I——”

“And, of course, the silly creature made a mistake. I regret that you should have been put to such annoyance—a horsepistol to one woman’s head is no fit reward for another’s stupidity. Permit me to light you to the door.”

To my surprise, she put out a hand in protest as I was about to take up the candle.

"No, no. It's no mistake, sir. That is—I wish to speak to you."

"To speak to *me*?"

"Yes. You are—aren't you?—Mr. Morvan?—Mr. Henry Morvan?"

I stared. "I have been called so."

"Yes, yes. And you're on your way to Morvan Manor—after a long absence. I would like to talk to you, a few minutes, if you please—a matter of very great importance."

I was perplexed. "Will you favor me with your name, madam?"

She hesitated. Her face, indistinguishable behind its covering, was lowered as if in embarrassment.

"My name? I hadn't supposed that would be necessary. My name doesn't matter, Mr. Morvan. You don't need to know my name, I hope."

I grew more and more puzzled—again I stared at her.

Her riding-habit, even to my unaccustomed eyes, seemed far behind the fashion. Her skirt, looped up on the left side, showed a worn boot beneath,

whereon shone a little spur, bright but badly bent. A pink fingertip peered through her frayed glove. The very veil was of the coarsest materials. This woman—this girl—was poor. Nay, more, she looked to be one not far from want.

As I eyed her I thought I understood. The times were not over nice—the fellow, Evans, might be free of his old highway life, but might not scruple at other things, things less answerable to the law, although far more contemptible than highway robbery. Bah! I shook myself at the thought.

“You’re right, madam,” I said. “Your name would be too great an honor—indeed, I am too much honored by your company as well, for I have present business. I must beg you to excuse me.”

I could feel her studying me through her veil. “Perhaps you don’t understand,” she said. “I’ve come expressly to——”

“No doubt,” I interrupted. “I regret if you’ve been put to useless trouble. I say it without offense, but——”

She cut me short with a sudden gesture, very peremptory. “I must speak to you, sir. Oh, I know my presence here is beyond all proper custom—but you are a gentleman, Mr. Morvan. I’ve

come to warn you—a matter of life and death.”

Her voice, beginning fierce with impatience, ended tremulous with earnestness. The tones, low and mellow, no less than the words, gave the lie to my suspicions. I felt my ears tingle with the shame of my mistake. This was not only a good woman, she was also a gentlewoman, else I was the more deceived. I prayed fervently that she had not guessed for what a base thing I had taken her.

While my eyes strove in vain to make out the face behind the black veil, I bowed profoundly.

“Your pardon, madam. Will you be seated? My years in the West must plead for my lack of politeness. I am wholly at your service.”

She sank into a chair by the table, and I seated myself opposite. The faces of both of us were circled by the candle’s glow. Fronting me, that thrice-accursed veil could not entirely hide the outlines of a small, well-poised head, nor altogether dim the curves of a shapely neck.

Fronting her steady black eyes and a face perhaps over stern—yet, I do myself the justice to believe, not a bad face—I watched her respectfully.

Although she had lately been so anxious to lay bare her business, and I impatient to learn it, yet

now that nothing hindered, neither of us seemed disposed to proceed. There fell on us a day-dream, such as floats about candle-light. The wind sighed through the cherry orchard outside the window, and the boughs tapped gently on the panes.

"Madam," I said at last, "that you should remove your veil would be a favor so great that I dare do no more than touch upon it,"—I forgot that I was posing as another than myself—"yet, believe me, I would give much to see your face because your air—your figure—reminds me of my mother's, as I knew her in my boyhood."

She made no move to yield to my request, but I could feel her eyes upon me. "My mother, too—I can hardly remember her. Yet they say she was very beautiful. Perhaps, if she were but living now——" She broke off with a little gasp as if she had said too much.

"What has come over me?" she said. "I sit dreaming here when——." With the riding whip she carried she beat softly on the table's edge—I could see the escaping fingertips pink in the candle-light. "Mr. Morvan, if you go to Morvan Manor, you are a dead man!"

I stared—then almost I laughed. I might

have told her that I had not the least intention of going to Morvan Manor, but to say that would have been to declare myself other than I seemed. Besides, there was a threat of violence in her announcement that must needs be of interest to one of my nature. Not only so, but the present situation was not without its own flavor, a flavor worth enjoying a little longer. I resolved to play my part in this comedy upon which I had entered almost in spite of myself.

“A dead man?” I smiled. “Does this Tom Bell I saw proclaimed below, so infest the highways that one cannot travel to Morvan unmoled?”

“The danger doesn’t lie on the road, sir. It’s after you’ve reached Morvan that peril—the deadliest peril—will overtake you.”

“What! Will there be poison in the heir’s cup?” I was enjoying my part. “Are there Borgias in West Jersey? Ah, madam, some village wag has been playing on your womanly fears.”

Her fingers drummed the table impatiently. “Listen, sir! I see I am obliged to be more precise. Mr. Morvan, no one has been playing with me—I speak from my own knowledge. Oh, I’m not here by chance—I’ve been riding to Pole Tavern

nearly every day since I heard you were expected from the West—I hoped I might persuade you to be warned in time. You must heed my warning. You'll remember that the Manor is on the very edge of the Pine Barrens—a part of the country always lawless, sir, and of late more so than ever. There is a plot to ruin you, Mr. Morvan—a plot that threatens your very life.”

“I'm to be the hated over-lord for the jack-knife of some Jacques Bonhomme of a charcoal-burner!”

“You must not come into Morvan,” she cried very hotly. “You must withdraw, sir, until the times are more settled—a month or two, at least. Yes, you must withdraw—you must.”

Had not this Lady of the Spur been so peremptory—had there been more of alarm and less of eagerness in her tone—I might have declared myself willing to forego a visit I had never designed. As it was, her insistence pricked my curiosity to the quick.

“Madam,” I said gravely, “if you would tell me how you gained knowledge of this fearsome plot—if you would condescend to reveal your name and face—even if you would explain the purpose of

your warning, I might the better decide upon——”

“My purpose?” she cried. “What other purpose can I have than to save the life of an innocent man? I am a woman—I have a woman’s fear of bloodshed! Isn’t that purpose enough?”

“You answer me but one question out of three,” I returned, “and that—pardon me!—none too plainly.” I gave her a grave bow. “Consider, madam! I am a peaceful gentleman on my way to inspect my property after many years’ absence. I am met at a public house by a pretty woman——” She made an impatient gesture. “A young and pretty woman,” I went on deliberately, “a woman shrouded in a veil, and in mystery. This charming woman—no, I insist!—this girl whose face I confess I’d give a year’s income to see, solemnly warns me to withdraw from my own Manor of Morvan. I am told to hold myself aloof from a peaceful county. I’m abjured, if I love life, to retreat like a craven because, forsooth! there’s some sort of bogle in the Pine Barrens. Pshaw! madam, what are a few runaways from Delaware, or half a dozen deserters from a war that’s past these fifteen years!”

I paused, not for want of breath, but because I could think of nothing more to the point. For

one who had been shooting wholly in the air, I flattered myself I had drawn a tolerably good bow.

In my interest in my own play-acting I had well nigh forgotten that I was not Henry Morvan and that I had no design to visit Morvan Manor.

I leaned far over the table, until my face was close to hers. "Madam, unless you can speak more freely, I shall be at Morvan within the week."

She was silent. My head inclined more and more toward her own. She did not withdraw it, but held herself proudly poised until our faces were scarce a foot apart.

All at once a thrill went through me! I had seen her eyes, gray, steadfast, looking at me from beneath level brows.

She averted her head at last with a little, tremulous sigh, very strange to hear after the heat she had lately shown.

"I've done what I could," she said, almost as if to herself. "I can say nothing more—I knew how it would be. Mr. Morvan, you'll not be warned?"

I shook my head, my thoughts busy with the memory of those eyes.

She had risen and was looking down at me. "I wish I might persuade you," she said.

Her voice was the voice of a tired child, resigned, and weary beyond words.

Impelled by a sudden impulse, I lifted her gloved hand and pressed it against my cheek. "I'm sorry," I muttered—for I knew not what.

She withdrew her hand, very gently. "Good-night!"

Before I could get to my feet, she had melted into the shadows beyond the candle's glow. Then the door of the cherry room closed softly.

I was left staring after her. I still felt the thrill of her eyes, and the touch of her glove against my cheek. The cherry-trees rapped on the window-panes—as if summoned by the sound, vague thoughts began to stir in my mind.

My little comedy had been played to the end, and now the curtain had fallen. I wished it might have endured longer. I wondered what it all meant, if anything. If Henry Morvan were but alive, and were on the road to his manor, here, indeed, would be an adventure ready to his hand. What a pity he had not been spared!

A whimsey, at once sad and mirthful, seized me. Henry Morvan was dead, yet he had but now been alive in me. Mr. William Hancock had lately wel-

comed his old friend's son from the West—Evans, the landlord, had bowed obsequious to the heir of Morvan—the strange Lady of the Spur had warned Mr. Morvan from his patrimony. I alone knew—I and my faithful Link—that Henry Morvan was lying in the grass of the Missouri.

The boughs beat insistently on the window—the wind must be freshening. My mind pursued its whimsey.

How strange—and, ah! how unjust a world was this I lived in! Tom Bell, the proclaimed highwayman, for whom the hue-and-cry was out again, must seek his lonely hunting-lodge on an island in the marshes, when, if he were but Henry Morvan, he could claim a fortune and honored ease thereby. How easy it would be——! My hand fell heavily on the table, and I sat breathing deeply.

As I sat, above the turmoil of my thoughts the boughs at the window-pane beat a cadence into my brain. “Tap—tap, tap! Tap—tap, tap! One—two, three!” One loud blow, then two quick, light ones. The sound rang in my head. “Tap—tap, tap! One—two, three!”

My breath cut the flame from the candle! I groped my way to the window and threw it open.

A man swung himself like a great cat from the branch of the cherry to the sill, and so into the room.

“Link!”

“Yes, Captain—it’s Link.”

“Good!”

I shut the window, drew the curtains close, and put a match to the candle. Presently I made him out

He was a lean man of forty years or thereabouts. His black hair was cropped close, and between high cheek-bones his eyes gleamed like bits of coal. Eyes and cheekbones were all that spoke of Indian blood. For the rest, he differed little in appearance from any other man of the common sort. He wore a cloth roundabout and dark cap, with pantaloons met at the knee by leathern gaiters.

All in all, your stranger would not have looked twice at the man. But, since the hour I had found him in St. Louis, starving and desperately wounded by a quarrelsome flatboatman, he had shown himself faithful as a hound.

I shook hands with him warmly—I had sent him ahead of me from Carlisle, in Pennsylvania, nearly a fortnight before.

“Why the window, Link?”

"Too many people in the bar-room, Captain," he said, in his quiet tones. "Didn't know how you were fixed. Thought maybe you didn't want anybody to see me—people might ask questions. Been in the cherry-tree some time. Thought I saw a woman's shadow on the curtain, though, and was afraid of a mistake, so didn't come in before."

"I've just had a very strange caller—but never mind that now. Did you find the lodge?"

"Yes. Spent two or three days cleaning it up. It's all right, Captain. Don't think anybody's been there since you left."

"That's likely enough, though it's nearly eight years since I saw it last. How's the country?"

The man's eyes lighted. "It's good—all good! Ducks, fish, rabbits—big game too. One night I made a flare by the spring, and killed a deer before an hour was out. Another time I saw two or three beasts in a herd—if it had been a thousand miles west, I'd swear they was buffalo."

"They were first cousins—wild cattle—descended from cattle strayed from the farms. Did you make the place fit to live in?"

"Everything's ready. Made up beds out of cedar limbs, with blankets over 'em. Stopped all

the chinks in the roof—weren't many. Slabs on the floor as good as new. Cleaned the leaves out o' the spring, and put new clay right through the whole chimney. Easy enough clear a place for Injun corn and potatoes next spring. Took down some buckets and cookin' things from that town you told me about—Gloster, ain't it?"

He stopped, and eyed me from crown to toe and back again. A slow smile twisted his stolid face. "Captain, think you'll spoil all them good clothes, roughin' it down there in the woods."

I smiled with him. "Very likely. The tailors in Carlisle were too much for me—I couldn't hold myself from dressing decently once again. It was a devilish dear business, though—it's left me only a hundred dollars of all last season's fur money. But, Link, it was lucky I was wearing the coat of a gentleman a little while since—I had to take the name of Mr. Morvan to save my neck."

In a dozen words I told him of my encounter with the landlord, and explained my ruse with Mr. William Hancock.

"Well out of trouble, Captain," said Link when I had finished. "Nothing to do now but make a bee-line for the lodge."

“For the lodge?” A plan, full-formed, leaped into my mind. I stared at him so long that he supposed I had not understood.

“Yes, sir. Be safer if we pull out from here right off. We can reach the marshes by to-morrow night.”

“Link,” I said slowly, “you must start for the lodge in an hour, but I’m not going with you.”

“You ain’t going?”

“No, I——” I broke off. “Listen! hear that!”

A clatter of dancing hoofs arose from the hard postroad before the tavern. Instinctively I knew whose horse it was that now leapt into a furious gallop southward.

“Who is it, Captain?” muttered Link. He shot me a keen glance. “Humm!—forgot that woman’s shadow on the curtain.”

“Link,” I said, “keep the lodge ready for me. I’m bound to be there soon—perhaps in a day or two—very likely a week. Meanwhile——” I paused and regarded him in a brown study.

“Yes, Captain?” he prompted.

“Meanwhile, Link, Mr. Henry Morvan will be living on the family plantation at Morvan Manor.”

IV

THE CABIN IN THE PINES

THE moon was down and the night had grown cold, when I put aside some shielding vines, and peered into the window of a cabin. Instantly I was aware that my pursuit had been rewarded.

I was looking into a living-room—one almost bare of furniture, and floored with rough-hewn slabs. The rude interior was lighted only by a single tallow dip and by the fire that burned in the mud chimney.

On a bench near the hearth, her feet extended invitingly toward the heat, sat the girl I had been seeking. Her skirt, looped up at one side, showed her riding-boot, its spur twinkling in the firelight. Her gloved hands played idly with her whip; but her brows, dark and straight, frowned steadily at the flames.

Save for the instant glimpse of her eyes three days before at Pole Tavern, and the uncertain view of her cheek vouchsafed me by the moonlight an hour since, this was the first time I had seen her face. Now I drew a satisfied breath!

An old woman, evidently the owner of the place, was busied over some concoction at a centre-table. Viewed from behind she looked a crone—fit hag for this sinister shelter in the West Jersey Pine Barrens. She was bent and lame, and there was something stealthy in her motions. But when she faced me, as she moved about her work, her fair, albeit wrinkled face, her smoothly-bound hair, and her neat white kerchief, looked thoroughly respectable.

As I stared in, her lips moved in the act of speaking. I hastened to lay my ear against the crack in the broken shutter—the window was without glass—and through it heard every word as plainly as if I sat at the table.

“Oh, yes, my dear,” she was saying, “it’s all right.” Her voice was pleasant, though she spoke with the accent of the Swedes who first settled that part of the State. “It’s all right. Why not? Nobody can ever find out, and if nobody ever finds out, it’s all right, eh?”

The girl frowned at the fire. “I don’t like it, Mary,” she answered. “It doesn’t seem—I mean, he doesn’t seem, of course—well, he wasn’t at all the sort of man I’d expected to see.”

“Oh, he wasn’t like what you’d expected?”

said the woman—her words, although not her tone, had a touch of insolence. “What did you expect? People like him don’t talk rough—they don’t swear at you and strike you—not the first time they see you, eh?”

“No, and his sort doesn’t drink too much either, as another sort does,” returned the girl. She tapped her boot impatiently with her whip. “He—the other one—frightens me, sometimes.”

The older woman hobbled toward the fireplace until she could see the girl’s face. She studied her intently for an instant.

“Oh, have you and my handsome boy been havin’ a quarrel?” she demanded. “Frightens you? No, no, he never meant to do that—that’s only his playful ways. Drink he does—too much—but that’ll all stop when you’re mistress of the big house with him—eh? He’ll settle down as quiet as a lamb, my dear.” The girl shook her head, and the old woman, with a tinkling laugh, limped back to her household duties.

Although I had followed the conversation with the closest attention, yet for me it might as well have been carried on by a pair of General Jackson’s Cherokees—it was just as much gibberish.

I stared at the dark pines, set close about this hollow in the Barrens. I thought of my riding-jacket, torn by the brambles through which I had forced my way, and of my boots, stained by the sloughs I had skirted. I recalled the lateness of the hour, and how I had so strangely caught sight of My Lady of the Spur. No, this was not the time nor here the place for meaningless conversation. The most inveterate gossip in the county would not seek such surroundings to listen to the mouthings of a Swedish crone.

Again I clapped my ear to the crack.

"Mary," the girl was saying, "I'm not acting honorably, I know that. I knew that before—before I saw him. It makes me tremble to think what might happen——"

"There, there, my dear!" said the woman. "We've talked it all over a hundred times! Didn't you make up your mind about that long ago? It's no use to worry now."

"But perhaps it isn't too late to change our plans. There may be some other way. He's a very resolute man—his pistol was in his hand like lightning that night! The whole plan frightens me—I don't know myself when I think of it. Here?

I've ridden out here through the wildest part of the Barrens. Suppose I had met some of those frightful-looking friends of mine—alone!—or a real highwayman! You know Mr. Hancock was robbed on the Clayville Road that night I was at Pole Tavern. Suppose some of the wild charcoal-burners should come in here! This is a dreadfully lonely house, Mary."

"Why, my dear," said the old woman, laughing in her silvery fashion, "nobody's here but me—only your own old Mary. She ain't going to let anybody hurt you. You don't think that, do you, my dear?"

"No, but——"

"And the boys of the Barrens—I ain't saying but what some of 'em are a wild lot, but I know everyone of 'em. They wouldn't hurt old Mary, nor anybody that's a friend of mine either. Why, if it wasn't for them, where'd all our plans be now? It takes high-spirited folks to take up with what we've got on hand."

I substituted eye for ear, and again peered into the room—by cautiously widening the aperture in the decaying shutter, I was able both to hear and see. The girl had risen, and was walking restlessly

back and forth. Her brows were still frowning, but her short upper lip and rounded chin gave her mouth a pathetic look. Clearly she was troubled and unhappy—I felt a sudden longing to be of comfort to her.

“Confound it!” I thought. “What’s all this about? The girl is certainly a lady, but what’s she doing here? I wish Bram were with me—he understands these people. I dare wager he’d see through my little mystery at once.”

I recollected that I had left Bramfield Morvan, my “cousin” Bram—I laughed at the thought—sitting as usual over a bottle of Madeira. Bluff and goodnatured as he was, I had already perceived that his habits were likely to prove his undoing. No man could play the pot-knight all his life without being the worst for it.

A sharp scream, quickly suppressed, sounded within the cabin. The girl had stopped her nervous pacing, and was staring at a corner of the room. What she saw was enough to strike terror to a bolder heart!

From a sort of a cupboard a huge snake was gliding slowly into view. Its white-and-brown striped body, as thick as a man’s arm, its length of

near eight feet, and its lazy motions, told me at once that it was the great pine-snake of the Barrens—a reptile usually harmless enough, but none the less frightful to behold.

While the girl stared in terror and disgust, the old woman broke into her silvery laugh.

“It’s only ‘Wriggles,’ my dear,” she said. “Us talkin’ so has waked him up from his nap.”

The girl recovered herself. She answered a little fiercely, although her lip still quivered. “Mary, I’ve told you I can’t bear to see that hideous snake. It’s the one hateful thing I know about you—your making a pet of such a—beast.”

Without hesitation, the old woman lifted the head and upper coils of the snake in her arms, and deposited them in the cupboard. Thus directed, the reptile dragged the rest of its body after, and Mary closed the door upon it.

“There, my dear,” she said. “He’s out of your sight now. ‘Wriggles’ wouldn’t hurt a fly, and he’s great comp’ny for me, nights. Why, why, you’re shakin’ all over, ain’t you? Too bad! Here, tea’s ready. A cup of it’ll do you good.”

The girl had thrown herself on the bench, her hand over her eyes. “No, no, I don’t want any

tea. But a snake! Mary, how can you? A snake is a bad omen, too."

The woman, pouring out a brew of strong, black liquid, started and frowned a little. There was the faintest shadow of a sneer about her kindly old mouth.

"Don't talk about signs. Take some tea, my dear, do. There's nothing like hot tea for the nerves. Many's the time it keeps me from gettin' the blues, winter nights."

The girl yielded to the other's insistence. She took a long draught, but put down the cup with an expression of distaste. "It's as bitter as gall, Mary."

The Swede laughed tolerantly. "You're hard to please to-night, my dear."

"Who wouldn't be?" retorted the girl with sudden fire. "Haven't I enough to make me so?"

"May be you have, my dear."

"Yes, I have. And what do you think?—to-day Mr. Arnold asked me to marry him. Do you wonder I'm rather sick of all this?"

"Squire Arnold!" cried the old woman. "You don't say! What did you tell him?"

"I told him 'no,' of course."

"Yes, yes—to be sure, you did."

"Yes. But he was quite—quite bullying over it."

"He'd better leave you be," said the other menacingly. "More than one of the boys in the swamp would see Squire Arnold had an accident, if I say the word. Only one man's goin' to marry you, and we know who he is—eh?"

"Pshaw, Mary! you talk nonsense. I've told you a dozen times I'd never marry him."

"Oh, we'll see. It's natural for a young girl to be a little shy at first. We'll see, my dear."

I was rather sickened by the frequency of the woman's "my dear!" There was a touch of sycophancy about it that I did not fancy. However, her face and laugh were genuine—in spite of her ugly pet.

I had at last found one point in the conversation to cling to. I remembered the Mr. Lawrence Arnold who had been in attendance at Morvan, the day I had taken possession of the estate.

He had stood beside Bram Morvan when the latter had welcomed me, heartily enough, at the door of the manorhouse. Arnold was much the same sort as Bram—a country gentleman, although

neither so riotous nor so frank in manner as my "cousin." I had guessed they were Damon and Pythias to each other.

My act of usurpation had been made absurdly easy. It had occurred to no one that I was other than I seemed—Henry Morvan returned to his ancestral home for the first time since his earliest boyhood. I had hardly played a part—I had had only to accept one—to fall into the duties that were awaiting me. My twenty years' absence from West Jersey—as was believed by all—excused me for what slips I made, and they were not many.

But, upon the other hand, my fear of making a fatal misstep had kept me from learning many things during my two days *at home*—things that now, lurking in the darkness outside the cabin window, I longed very heartily to know.

Exasperated at my ignorance, I ground my heel into the earth. It was a soil covered with pine-needles and fallen boughs—a twig cracked under my boot.

The Lady of the Spur was instantly upon her feet, her eyes luminous beneath her dark brows.

"What was that?"

"That snappin' sound?" asked the old woman.

"Yes. There's somebody there!"

"Oh, no. It's only the cold makin' the trees crack. It's all the time doin' it, cold nights like this—it's gettin' on to winter. You're nervous, my dear."

The girl's eyes were still luminous. She gazed so intently that I began to fear she had indeed made out my face through the opening in the shutter. I pulled my hat well over my brows that my eyes might not reflect the light.

Presently her body relaxed. Her mouth drooped, and a tired sigh escaped her.

"Yes, I *am* nervous," she said, "and, Mary, I feel sleepy. Perhaps it was the tea. I'd feel better if I could sleep. But this isn't the place for a nap." She glanced about with a barely-repressed shudder. "Besides, it's time to start home—I mustn't stay any longer."

"No, no, my dear," protested the Swede. "Sleep a little—why not? Nobody's here but your old Mary—she'll wake you in half an hour. You've plenty of time. No use in hurryin' off. You don't suppose your father's sittin' up for you, eh? Not hardly!"

"Suppose he *should* miss me some night, Mary?"

If he should ever find out what his daughter is doing while he sleeps——”

“Oh, yes, while he’s asleep!” interrupted the other. “No need to worry about that. Come, lie down, dearie. The bed in there’s mighty comfortable.”

The girl’s head drooped in spite of her evident effort to keep awake. “No, no, I mustn’t.”

The older woman glanced at her sharply, then took her by the arm. “Poor lamb! You’re ’most asleep already. Come, lie down a little while.” She led her, drowsily resisting, to a door at one side. “There! sleep in old Mary’s bed. Go in, and rest yourself anyway, my dear—lie down, and rest yourself a minute or two.”

She pushed her gently into the next room, and shut the door. Then she stood listening a moment, nodded her head with satisfaction, and limped to the table.

“Yes, yes,” she said aloud. “Time you should be asleep. He’ll be here any minute.”

She took the teapot to the fireplace, and poured the contents carefully into the fire. She gave her little, tinkling laugh.

“Yes, perhaps it was the tea, my dear. Per-

haps it was the tea." She replaced the pot on the table, then hobbled to a seat on the bench.

Swaying her body back and forth, she began to sing in a low tone. It was a pretty scene enough—the old woman, her hands crossed in her lap, her white hair shining in the firelight, crooning to herself. Yet I did not find the picture altogether pleasing to my taste, for the words of her song sounded strange from her wrinkled lips.

"A girl, a bottle, and a gun,
To make the seasons flit—
And of the three, when all is done,
The girl's the best of it."

"That's worthy to be one of Bram's ballads," I thought. "The old dame must have had her fling in her time."

"A faithful hound, a gallant horse
That strains against the bit—
A girl to hold them to the course,
For she's the best of it."

I vow there was something uncanny about this venerable crone, crooning a song that might better have fitted the camp-fires of my Western hunters. She sang on, her face turned toward the crackling logs.

“A spicy tale, a reckless lay,
To speed us toward the pit—
And if you will, to lead the way,
A girl's the—”

There was a heavy rustling in the corner of the room—the great pine-snake was again crawling from its hiding-place. The beldame had evidently been expecting it, for, without pause, her song fell to a low humming.

Her pet wound across the slabs and, reaching her side, laid his evil-looking head on her knee. Humming quietly, she began to stroke him as she might have stroked a cat. He coiled his body leisurely in front of the fire and, his head still resting on his mistress' knee, seemed to bask equally in her caresses and in the pleasant warmth from the embers.

So they remained, while I watched them with a feeling of disgust. One is not used to associating white hair with ribald songs, nor kind-faced old women with treacherous serpents.

Had it not been for the girl sleeping in the next room, I would have left the cabin, with its peculiar occupants, to the darkness and the pines. I had learned nothing, yet there must be something to learn. Two hours or so before, driven to distrac-

tion by Bramfield Morvan's company, I had gone for a ride, only to have my horse bolt and brush me off against a drooping bough. Then, by sheer good luck, I had obtained the thing which, insecure in my new position, I had not yet dared to seek—another glimpse of the Lady of the Spur who had warned me from Morvan. Trudging homeward on foot after my fall, I had caught sight of a girl, mounted on a gray gelding, stealing cautiously through the woods. A strange fancy for late riding!

Myself unseen, I had followed her to this lonely cabin. Now the night was cold, and the trees whispered mournfully overhead. Deep in the forest a screech-owl sounded its weird note.

I reflected that this part of the country was none too safe, and I had not thought to bring my pistols. If any of the charcoal-burners I had heard mentioned were to stumble upon me lurking here, I was likely to be bludgeoned out of hand—perhaps deserved to be for spying in such fashion. Yes, the library at Morvan was a safer place for me—but the girl!

As I stood debating, a sharp whistle sounded from the opposite side of the cabin.

The Swede started up, heedless of her pet's head which slipped smartly to the floor. The snake hissed angrily.

"Never mind, 'Wriggles'," said the old woman. "It's the handsome gentleman, don't you hear? Yes, yes, it's my handsome young man." She hobbled eagerly to the outer door. "He'll find something here for him—something soft and dainty, eh?"

There was a sharp knocking, and the whistle was impatiently repeated.

"I'm comin'," called the woman. "I'm comin', Squire! Who'd let you in, if it wasn't your old Mary? But her bones are stiff—yes, yes, her bones are old and stiff." She unlocked the door with trembling fingers. "Come in! Come in, sir! Ah, there you are—handsomer than ever. Maybe you won't look fine when you're Squire of Morvan in earnest. You'll have a bite and sup for your old nurse then, won't you?"

A man pushed her rather roughly aside, and stamped into the room. I was hardly able to repress an exclamation. It was Bram Morvan!

V

A CANDLE'S GLEAM

I HAD last seen my "cousin" two hours before at Morvan, lingering over his third bottle. He had refused to join me in the moonlight ride I had proposed, and had even flung a half-drunken jeer at me as I left him. Yet here he was, plainly quite at home, and well-nigh as sober as myself.

He was clad somewhat after my own fashion, in short blue riding-jacket, buff trousers, and Wellington half-boots. Someone had already aired an opinion that we resembled each other, but I flattered myself the resemblance was one of height only. Bram's florid features were as different as possible from my own brown face, and I was certainly five inches less about the waist.

He entered the cabin with his usual swaggering stride, and flung himself on the chimney-bench.

"Confound it, Mary!" he said. "Don't make such a row. I've as good an opinion of myself as any man, but I'm not a hero to bow down to. No, by Gad! not even an immaculate gentleman like my honorable cousin."

"Ah, but you soon will be, my dear, and——"

"Immaculate?" He laughed in his boisterous manner. "Gad! you don't know what the word means, do you? No, no, I'm hardly immaculate. Brrh!" he went on, holding his hands toward the fire. "It's getting cold. Where's the apple-jack, Mary——" The pine-snake, disturbed by his motion, suddenly slipped a heavy coil across his booted foot. "Good God! what's that!"

"Only 'Wriggles', Squire."

"'Wriggles'!" He kicked the reptile from him.

The snake reared its head almost to Bram's waist, and hissed furiously. My cousin sprang to his feet.

"What! By Gad! I'll make short work of you, you yellow worm. Time you were dead long ago!"

He grasped the iron poker as if to make good his threat, but the old woman interfered.

"There, there, Squire! Don't hurt my little one. He's a better mouser than any cat. Why, you gave him to me yourself."

"Yes, but he was two yards shorter then. I ought to have broken his back when I found him. I tell you a rod of snake isn't fit to have about a

hovel like this. Only an old witch like you would keep such a pet. Laurie Arnold was saying, the other day, a look in here was worse on his nerves than a bottle of rum. Ha, ha! on mine, too, by Gad! Where's the brandy, Mary? Here's the snake—let's have the cure handy. Ha, ha!"

While Bram was thus talking himself into a good humor the Swede had quieted her pet. The reptile coiled himself on the opposite side the chimney, his cold eyes reflecting the firelight. Now and then he lifted his head with an uncanny air of attention.

Mary hobbled about. "Here's the apple-jack, my dear—and here's a cup for you. Don't drink too much, though. We must talk business to-night, remember."

He took the bottle eagerly. "Business? Yes, I'll remember. What else brought me out here at this time of night? If it wasn't for you, Mary, I'd be in snug quarters to-night, snug quarters and pleasant company."

"Pleasant company, my dear? You don't mean *him*, surely."

"No, no, certainly not—although I'm free to admit he can talk well enough. He's been every-

where, and can tell about it like Daniel Webster himself. But what does a man mean when he says 'pleasant company'? He means fair company—fair company, Mary—d'ye understand?"

"A girl, eh?"

"Yes, of course—a girl. But not every girl, mind! The Flower of Fairview, now, she——"

The crone's eyes lighted. "The Flower of Fairview township?" Her eyes rested on the door of the inner room. "That's just the reason I wanted to see you here to-night."

He lowered his cup and stared at her. "What's that you say?"

"Why, my dear, you mean Miss——"

"Miss Nobody," he interrupted roughly. He hesitated a moment, then lifted his cup with jovial sentimentality. "I meant the Flower of *Morvan* township—the Flower of the Pines—the Wildflower of the Swamp, by Gad! Mary Pedersen of Lost Hollow, and 'Wriggles' of—of the devil, I give you a toast. Here's to the brownest beauty that ever showed a neat bare ankle!—here's to pretty Sue Buckaloo!"

"Sue Buckaloo!" cried the Swede. "Are you after *her*, Squire?"

"After her—that's the very word," responded the careless fellow. "I'm after her so hard that I've already had a good slap or two from Sue. Her blackfaced old father has threatened to blow my head off with his shotgun, too. I'm after her, but I don't mind telling you, Mary, that I doubt if I'll ever get her."

"I'm glad of it," retorted the old woman with spirit. She snatched the cup and bottle from his hands. "Why, Squire! would you chase after a charcoal-burner's daughter, when the other's just waitin' for you?"

Bram's eyes followed the liquor longingly. He broke into a rueful laugh.

"There you go! You always spoil my best dreams, Mary. I wasn't talking about marrying Sue, was I? Besides, the other girl isn't waiting for me. By Gad! no. I'm beginning to think that's only another one of our dreams."

The Swede knelt beside him and placed her hand affectionately on his knee.

"Oh, yes, my dear," she said softly. "She's waitin' for you. To be sure, she don't know she is; but she's waitin' for you—here—now."

"Here? What do you mean?"

"Why—what I say, my dear, to be sure."

He stared down at her. "She's here?—in this shanty?—at this time of night?"

"Yes, yes. I sent her a letter. I said I wanted to talk over things with her. I told her not to come till late—I'd be away with a sick woman. Yes, yes, nursin' a sick woman in the swamp."

"Well! you are a——"

"She came, but she wouldn't touch food nor drink. But, by and by, little 'Wiggles' scared her, so she took some tea for her nerves. After that she went to sleep, and very pretty she must look, sleepin' there so sweet."

His eyes sought the inner room. "In there?"

"Yes." She looked up at him, her white hair beautiful in the firelight. "She'll stay asleep for an hour yet, Squire—I made the tea. Yes, yes, I made the tea." She gave her little, silvery laugh.

Bram's face turned a shade redder than ordinary. He sprang to his feet. "By God! you *are* a devil!"

"Eh, Squire?" She scanned his glowering face. "Didn't you just tell me you were after Sue Buckaloo? Is this any different, eh?"

He sat down heavily. "Sue Buckaloo's only a

piner's daughter," he growled. "I may be damned already, but I won't have this on my soul."

She regarded him with that placid gaze that I now understood served to mask a devilish malignity of purpose.

"Well, well, my dear! Don't you ever say I didn't do my best for you. You know you're the only thing I care about in this world. But my! my! when I was nursin' you, if I'd known how obstinate you'd be when you grew up, I wouldn't have let myself get so fond of you. Don't you see, it would put a stop to all her shilly-shallyin' over marryin' you? It's only for your own sake old Mary wants to see you a rich man before she dies."

"Yes, I know," said Bram tolerantly, "but drop it, will you? Look here! where's 'Brownie' Davis, and the rest of the boys? I haven't seen anything of 'em since Henry Morvan came. They're coming to-night, aren't they?"

"To be sure, my dear."

"They ought to be here now. As lazy a lot of rips as I ever saw! They hang around Bat Merry's all day, rolling bullets and pitching quoits—and at night, God only knows what they're up to!"

"But they've been watchin' *him*, Squire—findin' out his little ways. They're pretty slow at doin' anything, though, that's a fact."

Three men stepped abruptly into the cabin—the door had been left ajar by the careless Bram.

"Don't you believe it, granny!"

"Slow—nothin', old woman!"

Bram leaped to his feet. "By Gad, 'Brownie'! Hello, boys! Where did you come from?"

The newcomer's nickname fitted him exceedingly well. He was a powerful fellow, with a queer, impish face, at present smuttied with streaks of charcoal. His head, as he threw his cap on the table, showed oddly high and pointed. The two men who followed him were as rough-looking as himself. Each carried a fowling piece.

"Where did we come from?" responded "Brownie." "We've been on a little side-issue, so to speak." He flung a heavy horse-pistol on his cap. "A side-issue—that's about it. Catch the idea, Squire? But no luck!"

"Confound you, 'Brownie'!" exclaimed Bram with some heat. "Your side-issues will get us all hanged some fine day. I advise you to drop them. And you, too, Garrison—Lenz—d'ye hear?"

"Ain't any danger," returned "Brownie" coolly. "Everybody thinks it's Tom Bell loose again. Ha, ha! Besides, there can't be any trouble, can there?—not while Squire Arnold rules the roost in Fairview township, and you in this one, so to speak."

"Yes, but how long will we rule the roost, if it's discovered we're in league with footpads? Our roost will be the loose end of a rope, that's the sort! And if anything happens to *us*, worse will happen to *you*, count on that. Now I want it stopped, d'ye hear? We've bigger business on hand—business that'll make all your fortunes, as well as my own."

"All right, all right," grumbled the other. "I said it was on'y a side-issue, didn't I?" He turned on the Swede. "Now then, old woman, haven't you got anything to drink?"

"You won't get a drop in this house, 'Brownie' Davis," she snapped, "no, none of you, until you've talked things over with me and the Squire. The business is movin' too slow to suit us. Something's got to be done."

"I'm willin'," said the fellow. "Close the door, Bill. Yes, and lock it. I'm for bein' careful,

first, last, and all the time. Humph! I nearly forgot! Granny, whose horse was that I saw outside?"

"Mine," said Bram.

"I mean the horse with the side-saddle," responded the other dryly.

"That's mine, too," asserted Bram. "I'm in charge of it, at any rate. Don't bother your head about that."

The fellow gave him a keen glance, then stared deliberately about the room. His eyes lingered on the table—a pair of small riding-gloves lay half-hidden by the teapot. He grinned at Bram.

"Side-issue of your own, Squire, so to speak," he said coolly. "I reckon you know what you're about. Well, I'm ready for business."

The two other men leaned their weapons in a corner, then, paying no heed to the hissing protests of the great pine-snake, placed themselves before the fire in an attitude of attention. The crone took her seat upon the chimney-bench, my redoubtable "cousin" beside her. "Brownie" lolled carelessly against the table, his back toward the window where I was listening and looking with all my soul.

"Go ahead, Squire," said "Brownie."

In my eagerness to miss nothing, I forgot that I stood on an ascending slope, and that I leaned against a half-ruined shutter.

"Boys," began Bram, raising his hand to emphasize his words, "here's the way matters stand now. My cousin——"

I fell headlong into the room!

There was a hubbub of startled cries and oaths, In the midst of which, and the furious hissing of the great snake, I scrambled to my feet and hurled myself out of window as abruptly as I had come. "Brownie's" pistol cracked futilely behind me as I landed in the pine-needles.

I gained my hands and knees, and began to crawl along close to the wall of the cabin. I must reach the path by which I had come or I was lost.

I could hear the men within rushing madly to the door. It was locked, and delayed them a precious half minute. Bram's voice rang out furiously.

"Curse the thing! Damnation! Who could it have been!"

Apparently the door yielded, and they sprang into the open.

"Push straight for the 'neck'," roared

“Brownie.” “He’s bound to go that way. Nothin’ but marsh everywheres else.”

It was priceless information for me. I must act upon it without an instant’s delay. I leaped to my feet—and recoiled.

I was in front of an open window. The Lady of the Spur, a flickering candle in her hand, was staring out. Our faces were not a yard apart. Her eyes were luminous beneath their level brows. Her lips were half-parted.

Though a man may run ten yards in a second, and ten yards might mean life, yet for a full second I gazed at her. Then she caught a sobbing breath—the candle was extinguished.

I bounded into the thicket.

VI

THE FOREST PATH

By hard running I reached the wooded ridge well ahead of my pursuers. Obedient to "Brownie" Davis' commands, they were pushing straight through briar and undergrowth, whereas, had they kept to the path up which I was running, they might have overtaken me almost at once.

As it was, in three minutes I was half-way across the "neck." I was beginning to laugh to myself over the piners' certain chagrin, when, in the darkness, I ran headlong against the stump of a tree. The shock was so severe that I turned quite faint—for a moment I thought I had been struck from ambush.

I clung, gasping, to the pine trunk until the first giddiness passed off. Then I started on, but one stride proved I was too much shaken to keep up the pace. I staggered and nearly fell.

"Brownie's" voice rang out a few rods down the ridge. "Keep to the bottom, Bill—he might take to the reeds!"

The sound of men forcing their way through the woods drew nearer every instant. I would be

caught like a crippled cat—without the power of resistance.

Summoning all my resolution, I stumbled a few paces, gained a dense thicket of scrub-pines, and was dragging myself into their cover, when I realized that it was one of the very places my pursuers would be likely to search most thoroughly.

My motions had dissipated my giddiness. I gripped the bough of a ten-foot scrub, and swung myself into its top. I sank into the bushy dome, as hidden as if I were in the moon.

I was barely in time. Three or four dark figures burst into the path I had just quitted.

“Forward!”—it was Bram’s voice—“He can’t be far.”

“Look out for the blasted pine, Squire!” called one of the men.

His warning came too late, for my worthy “cousin,” although checking himself with vigor, came smartly in contact with the stump.

“Damnation!” he yelled. “It’s broken me in two!”

The incident served to bring the whole party to a standstill. They halted in front of the scrub-pine. I gripped my leaded riding-whip firmly, and

held my breath, fearful lest they should hear the thumping of my heart.

"Where the devil has he got to?" demanded Davis. "I heard his boots on the hard ground, a minute ago. The spong begins the other side of the stump—if he's leggin' it there now, we're beat."

"Feel in the sand," ordered Bram astutely. "May be you can find his tracks. Ugh! I'm near crucified, by Gad!"

Straining my eyes, I presently made out a form crawling zig-zag across the path, a yard or two beyond the riven pine.

"No," growled "Brownie," after a moment—the fellow's conversation was always larded with oaths which I shall not trouble to repeat—"No, there ain't any tracks. He must ha' stopped before gittin' this far." He rose to his feet. "Where's the most likely place?"

"In the cripple there," said Bram. "So ho! Hark to him! Search him out, boys!"

The boisterous fellow, unrestrained even in the gravest moments, cried his men on as he would have urged his hounds after a fox. They soon beat the thicket from end to end, while I crouched securely above their heads.

Cursing their ill-luck, they again gathered in the path.

"Gone clean away," declared Bram. "I dare swear he had a boat, and took to the marsh, after all—d'ye see?"

Davis swore fiercely. "That's it, Squire. If Bill didn't get into the bottom first, it'd be easy enough for the hellion to git his punt and sneak down a branch to the bay. That's what he's done, sure."

"Didn't anybody see what he looked like?" demanded my "cousin."

"Lord! *I* didn't," replied the fellow called Lenz. "He tumbled through the window both ways, like the devil hisself. I ain't sure I saw *anybody*."

"Well, *I* saw him," said Davis. "If he hadn't been so almighty quick, we'd be buryin' him now. But I don't know what he looked like. I couldn't tell you if he was ten feet high, or white or black."

"Was he a piner, d'ye think?"

"Yes, I reckon so, Squire. I don't know."

"By Gad, boys," declared Bram. "I was so mixed up with that cursed snake I only saw the scoundrel's boots—they looked too good for a

piner's." He laughed ruefully. "Yes, or for me, for that matter. Well, I give it up. I'm only wondering how much he heard."

"How much?" repeated Davis. "Not a thing. Nothin' had been said, I reckon—nothin' to hurt. Don't you remember, Squire, you was just goin' to begin?"

"That's all right for you boys," returned Bram. "But I'd been talking before you came in."

"About this business, Squire?"

"Yes—no-o, not exactly. It was—hum-m——" He paused in embarrassment.

His follower broke into a knowing laugh. "Ha, ha! Squire! You'd been talkin' about your side-issue, I reckon. Wasn't that it? Side-issue and side-saddle, so to speak. Well, I guess that ain't agoin' to hang nobody—not even you. Ha, ha! What's a little love-makin'! I reckon you can trust the side-saddle, eh?"

"Oh, of course. But I'd like to know what he heard. He might make things pretty awkward for me." Bram's tone sounded decidedly sheepish.

"Mebbe he didn't hear nothin', Squire," suggested Lenz. "More'n likely he's some oysterman who lost his way, and first thing he knew, he rolled

slap down the hollow into the cabin. It'd be easy to come plumb through the window that way, once he got started. O' course, he'd light out, hotfoot, when a room full o' people begun shootin' at him. I never did see anybody move so quick in my life."

"By Gad, man! I believe you're right," declared Bram. "It certainly sounds reasonable enough. What d'ye think about it, 'Brownie'?"

"Like as not, Squire. Anyway, he's clear off, and he didn't hear nothin' to hurt—I ain't worryin' over it."

No better explanation offered, so after some little grumbling and swearing, they moved off toward the cabin.

The sound of their voices and footsteps died away through the pines, but for a long time I did not care to stir. Not three yards from my ear, a screech-owl began to hoot most lamentably. The weird cry made me shiver.

I waited a full twenty minutes, then lowered myself to the ground. My ribs still ached from their collision with the stump, but I consoled myself with the thought of Bram's similar mishap. I stole along the sandy path. The ridge shortly fell away to the slough-bordered bottom-land. I

was doubtless out of all danger, but I traversed this, too, with silent speed.

Mechanically I avoided the pools in my path, but my thoughts were busied with the girl I had seen by the candle's gleam. Her eyes seemed to shine luminously upon me—her mouth drooped pitifully.

Her face had showed golden-pale. Was it fear, or weariness, or only the candlelight that had wrought her pallor? The curves of her bosom and throat lingered in my memory—and the roundness of her lifted arm.

Had she recognized me? If so, what wild conjecture she must have of my presence!

I was deep in the forest when at last I came to a halt, and stood listening. The owls hooted from the ridge, and a fox barked in the distance. The pines sighed on every hand. Nothing else stirred.

Although I had left the Lady of the Spur in what was veritably a den of thieves, yet I had small fear for her safety. In some way that I did not understand it was to Bram's interest to protect her—even from himself.

After an hour or more's toilsome walk, I

emerged into the country road. It was the very spot where the girl had turned her horse into the pines, and so drawn me in pursuit.

Notwithstanding my assurance of her safety, I felt some qualms at deserting her—to be sure, I had not been allowed much choice in the matter. I sat down on a fallen tree where I could watch the path unobserved.

It was not more than an hour before the dawn. The trees looked grim and threatening, and a damp mist clung about their boles. I could not resist a shudder as I thought of the adventures of the night. Suppose, after all, Bram should change his mind about the girl! Perhaps he had already repented his chivalrous impulse—or was it merely fear of the possible consequences that had restrained him? Perhaps he would yet yield to the sneers of the malevolent crone.

But I had not long to wait. There was the quick tramp of a horse's hoofs—the girl rode out of the forest.

She passed within two yards of me, but it was still too dark for me to see her face or eyes. I could only make out that she sat erect in her saddle, as one who feels neither fear nor distress. I noticed,

too—for the tenth time—her graceful length of limb, and the sway of her slim waist.

She passed, unconscious of my scrutiny. Gaining the road, she instantly put spurs to her horse, and vanished at a gallop. As I sat listening to the drumming hoofs, sounding fainter and fainter, I suddenly remembered that I had not even learned her name.

It was almost daylight when I let myself in the side-door at Morvan. No one was stirring in the house, and I dragged myself wearily to bed. I was too tired to lie awake an instant after I touched my pillow, but I dreamed very gruesomely. Through my heavy slumbers, I thought my grandmother—in Heaven these many years—sat on a throne of yellow-and-brown serpents, and sang a roaring song:

“A spicy tale, a reckless lay,
To speed us toward the pit—
And if you will—to lead the way—
A girl's the best of it.”

while a tall girl, her eyes luminous beneath level brows, ran through endless swamps of tea, and sobbed my name as she ran.

VII

LATE BREAKFAST

MY "cousin " and I met over a late breakfast. The eyes of both were heavy, but, in addition, his had the yellow hue that betrays over-indulgence. The cup, too, rattled against his teeth as he sipped his strong coffee. I guessed that he and his followers had consoled themselves for their failure to overtake me by finishing the Swedish crone's apple-brandy.

After Joshua had poured my coffee and taken himself off, I opened my batteries.

"What ho, my lad!" I challenged. "Art downcast this morning. 'Look not upon the wine when it is red!' You must have made a night of it, Bram."

He tried to assume his ordinary cock-a-hoop manner. "I did, by Gad! Hang it! I ought to have taken your advice, and stopped at the second bottle. I kept at it three-parts the night."

"I didn't see anything of you when I came in," I returned carelessly. "I looked into the dining-room, too."

"Eh? Oh, I didn't sit at table long after you left. I finished up in my room—worse luck! Joshua put me to bed, I'm afraid."

"A bad habit," I remarked with due gravity.

"Damnable! Downright damnable! I'd reform, but what else is there for me to do in this accursed hole?"

"Come, come! I won't join you in cursing Morvan, until I know a little more about it. Besides, man, you aren't forced to stay here. You've income enough of your own to do as you please."

"Income to do as I please? No, not a tenth of it." He broke an egg with a vindictive gesture. "D'ye see, Hal, I can't live quiet anywhere—it isn't in me. I'm no parson—I've got to have my fling. I can't do it in the world on my money, but I can here, in a beggarly way. It's a God-forsaken spot, but after all, I'm used to it. I'd never feel at home anywhere else. No, no! Here I am, and here I'll stay—I mean, until you evict me."

"Oh, only at your leisure," I said with secret relish.

"Well, well, Bat Merry will take me in when the time comes. But this neighborhood isn't the place for a quiet life, d'ye understand? To tell the truth, Hal, you aren't the sort of man I guessed

you'd be. The way you've been knocking about all your life—things we heard now and then even down in this neck of the woods—well, hang it! I thought you'd have more dash about you—more spice and go, d'ye see? I was counting on your hunting the tavern fox along with the best of us.

“But you say you want to be quiet here—you've sown your wild oats, and want to settle down. All proper enough, of course, but, as I was telling you the other day, there have been a good many threats against us gentlemen lately—it's a wild country down here, take my word for it. I don't like the look of things—there's a ruck of rascals from the three States in the Barrens. Footpads have been pretty lively the last few months, too, and you know Tom Bell robbed Mr. Hancock over toward Clayville only the night before you came. These piners and runaways—I shouldn't wonder but what they raided some of our houses any night—this house may be. Lawrence Arnold thinks the same thing.”

“Pshaw, man!” I returned. “You talk as if we were in the midst of the brigands of Sardinia. If we live until we're attacked by the yokels from the woods, we'll reach a green old age.”

“At any rate, I've warned you.”

"So you have. But if you think there's danger for me about here, what about yourself? Wouldn't a tar-and-feather coat become you as well as me?"

"Eh! Me? Oh, these people are used to me. Besides, I'm not the Squire any longer—none of them is likely to envy me anything."

"I understand," I said. "However, I think I'll chance it."

He glanced at me rather sourly. "Stay, if you must then."

"I intend to," I responded easily. "By the way, Bram—who is the Lady of the Spur?"

He put down his cup so sharply that the saucer leaped on the table.

"What's that! What did you say!"

"What's the matter?" I rejoined.

"Nothing. My confounded nerves—after that third bottle last night. Who was that you asked about?"

"‘The Lady of the Spur,’ I called her. I mean a tall, graceful girl, with straight eyebrows, and a short upper-lip."

"Where did you see her?" His anxiety was painful.

I put my fancy briskly to work. "On the post-

road, three or four miles above the village—the day I came. Her horse had gone lame, and she was leading him. I dismounted, and took the stone out of his hoof.”

“Oh, I know now.” His heavy neck relaxed, and the blood returned to his florid cheeks. “It must have been Ferriss Dayton.”

“Ferriss Dayton? Very good. But who is she? Ought I to know the name?”

“You certainly ought—the Dayton part, at any rate.”

“I’ve been from home so long—I hardly remember my own name.”

“Just so. Well, she’s the same relation to you I am—first cousin three times removed, and of the half-blood. Ha, ha!” He planted both elbows on the table. “No wonder you’re at sea. It’s this way. You remember our great-grandfather had three wives—a regular Grand Turk! Well, three wives—three families—three lines of descendants.” He held up one finger comically. “Number one, Hal Morvan—God save him!” He put up three fingers. “Number three, Bram Morvan—God help him!” The three fingers gave place to two. “But number two, Ferriss Dayton—God—God——”

"God bless her. Amen!" I said.

"She needs it," he agreed. "I doubt if she'd return the blessing, though."

"Why not?"

"You see, she's John Dayton's daughter. You remember?"

I shook my head. He went on.

"It was he had that lawsuit over the inheritance, with your grandfather. John Dayton fought the will to the last, fought and lost, by Gad! Of course, the confounded lawyers used up the share of the property he did get. When it was over, Cousin John had hardly a cent left in the world. He and Ferriss live over in the next township now—Chestnut Farms, they call their place. They aren't quite paupers, but they're the next thing to it—poor enough to make it grind, d'ye see?"

"Do they bear me a grudge for what my ancestors did?"

"The old man does—yes, there's no doubt he bears a grudge. And Ferriss has been brought up with that sort of thing—that sort of father. She can't help feeling some of it."

"I'm sorry."

"But that isn't all," went on Bram. It was

plain he relished my discomfiture not a little. "You know that lawsuit was the bitterest kind of a fight. After the last trial—there were a dozen, at least—after the Court gave its final decision in your grandfather's favor, he came out of the courthouse fairly swelling with the triumph of it."

Again Fancy turned a neat phrase for me. "I've heard the old gentleman wasn't very kindly."

"No—he had a temper like a crab-apple. Well, John Dayton met him outside the courthouse and told him what he thought of him, in the plainest Anglo-Saxon."

"That didn't help matters, I suppose."

"No. The old hot-head used his cane on Cousin John—and, by Gad! John's spirit was so broken for the time that he never called him out for it. No wonder John Dayton—and Ferriss, too—hates the very name of you, eh?"

"No—no wonder," I admitted sadly. A sudden thought made me stir uneasily. "You called yourself number three, just now, and Ferriss Dayton number two—you meant *vice versa*, I suppose."

"Not at all. John Dayton's grandmother was the Grand Turk's second wife—*my* grandfather was the son of the third wife."

“What! Do I understand that Ferriss Dayton is the next heir to Morvan? If I hadn’t turned up—should die, I mean—Miss Dayton would have—all this?”

“Of course.”

I stared at him. I had taken a step I had not dreamed of—a move against a woman. I was silent so long that he repeated again.

“Of course, man. Who else?”

“It’s strange I never heard of all this before, Bram.”

“Oh, you were away at school. Then you went the grand tour. Nobody ever thought to show you the old family skeleton, or, may be, everybody thought it best to keep the dusty bones locked up in the closet.”

“But I never even knew there was a Ferriss Dayton.”

“No, why should you? It’s been Europe or the West for you, ever since you grew up. Gad! Hal, I envy you your roughing it on the Missouri.”

“It’s there, waiting for you,” I said.

He growled out an oath. “Morvan for me—I mean West Jersey, of course. Your mother until she died, and you since, have let me live here so

long, I can't get out of the way of thinking I own it." He brought himself up with a jerk, and heaved a sigh that seemed to come from the toes of his boots. "By Gad, Hal, mornings after I've had a bottle too much, I wish I wasn't such a rip. Well, I'm off—a stiff ride will take this bad taste out of my mouth."

He stamped from the room. Long after the coffee had grown cold, I sat pondering what he had said.

Perhaps no man, even in a plain way of life, may clearly set down all that he thinks or the reasons that lead him to action. And my way was by no means plain.

This thing I resolved upon at last—to hold myself only as a Morvan—to do what Henry Morvan might do were he present in the flesh. Yet every moment I so bore myself, I was keeping a lovely girl from her heritage. So be it! Judging from what I had seen the night before at the cabin in Lost Hollow, Ferriss Dayton deserved small consideration.

VIII

A MORNING RIDE

WHEN at length I roused myself, I called for a horse and, following Bram's example, went for a ride. As yet I had hardly had time to go over "my" land.

It was a charming day in the early fall, and I felt a pleasant, but, under the circumstances, a deluding sense of power, to see the estate, stretching a good two miles in every direction from the house-crowned hill. To the eyes of one of Henry Morvan's English friends the property might have looked wild enough, for full half of it was clothed in shaggy forests, and about the rest well-kept roads and trim lawns were none too plentiful. But the Bob-White was calling in the buckwheat, and down by the lake where the uplands melted into the pines, some wild ducks were preening themselves in the sun.

At wide intervals in the great forest, columns of smoke went straight up in the air. "Charcoal-burners," I reflected.

Bram's toast occurred to me: "Here's to the

brownest beauty that ever showed a neat bare ankle—here's to Sue Buckaloo!"

Impelled by a vague curiosity, I marked the location of the nearest column of smoke, and picked my way toward it through the pines. I judged that the charcoal-kiln, if it were really such, was within my bounds—I might as well ride in that direction as in any other.

So shortly I came upon a little cottage—a home of the poorest sort, but astonishingly neat and well kept. There was even a split-rail fence, serving to mark off a small flower-garden—a thing beyond the ordinary in a piner's homestead.

No one seemed to have noticed my approach. While I sat my horse rather at a loss, I heard voices on the other side of the cottage. I dismounted and sauntered around the corner.

A man whom I recognized as Bram's friend, Mr. Lawrence Arnold, was talking earnestly to a girl. The girl's face, eyes, and hair, were brown as a berry. A calico frock, cut rather short, disclosed a neat pair of ankles. It was Sue Buckaloo, beyond a doubt.

At the moment I appeared their conversation was being brought to a peculiar close. As Arnold

leaned eagerly over her, she struck him smartly on the cheek with her open hand.

"There!" she cried. "Go, talk to one of your own people, who can't help herself. You ain't *my* landlord. You can't turn *my* dad out to starve, like you did Letty Miller's."

Arnold was by no means abashed. "Come, come, girl! Know your place," he returned, rubbing his cheek angrily. "Is this the way you treat a gentleman? Your pretty face has spoiled you, Sue."

"You better get out o' here before dad gets back," said the girl, frowning. "He's mighty quick with his scatter-gun."

"He'll repent it if he takes a high hand with me," said Arnold. "Now, Sue, be reasonable. You'd a deal better agree——"

"Good-morning," I interrupted, advancing. "May I venture to ask what's the matter in dispute? I hope my tenant hasn't been disrespectful to you, Mr. Arnold."

The girl fell back with a muttered cry: "The new Squire!" and stood watching me curiously. Arnold's face grew red, but he lost nothing of his self-possession.

“Oh! Good-morning, Mr. Morvan. No, no! It’s all right. I’m willing to make allowance for the whims of a spoiled beauty. I know a little about women. Sue, here, is pretty and she knows it. Too much attention has about turned her little head, by Ged!”

“Very likely,” I rejoined pleasantly. “The best remedy is to leave her alone, isn’t it? You remember the old song?—‘if she be not fair to me’?”

My easy-going manner had completely deceived the man. He fumbled in his pocket, and producing a clay pipe, began to fill it with canaster.

“No doubt it would serve her right to leave her in the sulks, but, d’ye see, Mr. Morvan, she’s too pretty to let alone. It would be a crime, no less, to let a figure and face like Sue’s go to waste. She’s worth some trouble—you understand, eh?”

“I’m not sure I do.”

He gave a careless laugh. “I mean I’ve just been telling Sue she’s wasting herself down here in the Barrens. I’ve offered to take her to the city for a month or so—let her see the world and live like a lady. I’ll look out for her afterward, too. That’s fair enough, I take it. As a man of the world, Mr. Morvan, you’ll understand a gentleman

doesn't expect a girl's temper over such a chance will last. Eh? what do you think?"

I saw the girl's eyes flash. She opened her lips as if to speak, but at a sign from me, closed them again.

"Sir," I said deliberately, "I think such an action as you propose, more suited to a Don Juan than to an American gentleman."

"What do you mean!"

"I mean you are playing the part of a scoundrel, sir."

"Be careful what you say, Mr. Morvan. I'm not a patient man."

"As impatient as you choose, sir. I mean what I say."

He gave me a very ugly look. The pipe snapped between his fingers. "There's a way for satisfaction between gentlemen, Mr. Morvan. You understand me?"

"Certainly. I'm at your disposal any hour of the day. No—not earlier than eight o'clock. I never could endure a meeting at dawn."

My coolness—my contemptuous attempt at humor—nonplussed him. Perhaps had I blustered more, he would have known better how to deal with

me. As it was, his face turned purple. He gulped down his wrath.

"You're a newcomer in the county, Mr. Morvan—you don't understand our ways. I'm willing to overlook your words."

"As you please," I answered indifferently. "Meanwhile, sir, I beg to point out that you are on *my* land, and have been molesting *my* tenant."

Without a word or glance, he turned square on his heel and walked away through the arches of the pines.

I turned sharply on the girl. "Sue," I said, "I'm afraid you're a sad coquette—a mischief-maker, Sue."

She made a little bob. "Sir? Oh, no, sir. I ain't—no, sir. He—he *will* bother me, sir."

A smutty-faced man came abruptly around the corner of the house. "Here's dad," cried the girl. "Dad, here's the new Squire."

The fellow—a lank but powerful man of middle age—made an awkward inclination of his head. I offered him my hand, and he took it after an apologetic glance at his charcoaled fingers.

"You have a pleasant place here, Buckaloo."

"Thank you, sir," he answered. "It's all Sue's

doin', though." His face hardened, and he eyed his daughter. "Didn't I see Squire Arnold just leavin' here?"

"Yes, dad," said the girl. "He came to see me—it wasn't my askin', though. He—he talked to me. O' course, there's only one thing *he* wanted to talk to *me* about. I slapped him, but he wouldn't go 'way. Then, then——" She looked at me rather saucily—"Squire Henry, he drove him away."

The charcoal-burner regarded me with a certain uncouth dignity. "I'm much obliged to you. I'm on'y a poor man, but I tell you, Squire, there'll be shootin' if he don't leave my gel alone."

"I intend to make sure he does," I said. "If Mr. Arnold, or if Mr. Bram, comes here, I want you to let me know of it."

"Mr. Bram on'y comes once in a long while, to look around like. He never bothers Sue—Squire Arnold's the one."

"I'd understood otherwise," I answered. "At any rate, if I visit you too often myself, you must remind me of it—even with a shotgun," I laughed.

"I'm sure you'd always be welcome, sir."

I took a serious tone. "But remember, Sue,

you must do your part—you must keep those brown eyes of yours quiet. Buckaloo, when you're away all day, send your daughter to stay with one of the neighbors."

"I'll do it, Squire," said the man gratefully.

As I rode away, I would have flattered myself that, in spite of my twenty-eight years, I had given counsel worthy of a real lord of the manor, had I not caught Sue pouting at me saucily from behind her father's back.

I crossed the lower edge of the fields to reach the postroad. Leaping my horse over a locust-hedge, I landed fair beside My Lady of the Spur, ambling pensively along on her gray gelding.

Before she could rouse her mount to action, I reined beside her with lifted cap.

"Good-morning," I said. "You must let me introduce myself in form, Cousin Ferriss. I am Henry Morvan."

If my sudden appearance had startled her, she did not show it. Her gray eyes met mine coldly.

"If I see Mr. Henry Morvan," she answered, "I must be permitted to say I have no wish to claim kinship with him."

She wore the dark-blue riding-habit I had al-

ready seen her in on two occasions. My mind, sharpened by Bram's story of the girl's poverty, took in with pity that the skirt had been darned in a dozen places. The curves of her slim figure were outlined by the threadbare jacket. Her head was held proudly; but I was not to be rebuffed.

"Ah, Cousin," I said, "don't let us carry on our fathers' quarrels. Give me a chance before you hate me on account of others."

The girl flared out at me. "I hate you on your own account, sir."

"Cousin," I pleaded, "I beg you to wait a little—wait until you know me—then if you learn to hate me, 'twill be my own fault. Give me a chance as you'd give any stranger a chance. I'm not a Turk of a great-grandfather—nor a hotheaded fool of a grandfather, either. I'm only a harmless man who wants to be a friend."

"You talk prettily, sir, but I know you are not harmless."

"Believe me, I am, Cousin Ferriss."

"I cannot believe it." The short upper-lip met the lower-lip firmly.

"Why not?" I asked. "I'm the same man you warned at Pole Tavern only three days since. Ah,

yes, I know now it was you—a mere veil can't hide *you*, Cousin. I'm sure you didn't think me a monster then. Just because I disregarded your advice—because I persisted in coming to Morvan—you won't spurn me—please!”

She did not attempt to deny her identity. “I knew *who* you were at Pole Tavern,” she said, “but I did not know *what* you were.” She met my startled gaze scornfully. “I detest a spy,” she flashed.

“Ah—you recognized me last night—at the cabin window?”

“I did, sir.”

“Cousin,” I said, “one may be protector and spy at the same time.”

“A lame excuse, indeed. I needed no protector, if that is what you mean.”

“Perhaps.” I laughed, not very mirthfully, I confess. “What does Bram say about it—about my being the man they were hunting last night?”

“Bram? He doesn't know it. I haven't told him—and sha'n't. His poor head has enough to carry already, I fear. Besides, I am not a tale-bearer, even if Mr. Henry Morvan is a spy.”

I began to grow resentful. “Cousin,” I said,

"you're unkind. You force me to say more than I intended. I had good reason to follow you last night."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, madam." I grew hotter as I went on. "Reason enough to make you understand why I played the spy."

"What was this weighty reason?" she demanded flippantly.

I thrust my hand in my breastpocket and brought out a soiled piece of paper. "This, Cousin. Possibly you recognize it. Read it, if you please."

Her face was quite unmoved, but she drew back daintily. "Read that? Not I. Why should I?"

"Then I'll read it for you," I exclaimed, "though doubtless you know its contents by heart."

Without waiting for her reply, I proceeded to read aloud. She sat her saddle with a fine air of indifference, yet she made no move to ride away as she might well have done. I give the note, rude spelling and all.

"Squier Hen. Morvin we have heerd of you and we doant like what we heer now you got to get out of this befor worst happins to you you leav Morvin by this day weak if

you doant love taranfethers this heer is fare warning so
no more from yours truely but get

Pine Owl."

Under the signature was a rude drawing in charcoal—a skeleton owl grotesquely perched on a skeleton horse, and brandishing in its claws what might have been meant either for a tarbrush or a torch.

"There, Cousin Ferriss," I said. "That's my reason. I found this precious document pinned to a porch-pillar, the first night I came to Morvan."

"Your reason is beside the point," she retorted. "Must you spy upon me, merely because there are runaway slaves in the Barrens? Who was it made light of a warning he received at Pole Tavern? And now because he sees it down in black-and-white, instead of hearing it from the lips of a woman, he must peer into windows at night. I would have supposed the Squire of Morvan had more courage!"

"Courage enough, perhaps," I rejoined with sarcasm. "But I saw this picture thrust in your belt the night I had the honor to receive you in the cherry room."

She laughed outright. "That ridiculous picture? In my belt? You are mistaken."

"What! You deny it?"

“I deny it, sir.” She gathered the reins. “I deny it, absolutely.” She touched her horse with the spur, and he ambled leisurely away.

I gazed after her, sadly puzzled.

“Would she tell me a downright lie?” I mused. “I’ll swear I saw that owl picture in her belt—that picture or one just like it.” I gave a long whistle. “By Heaven! one just like it!”

IX

SKETCHES IN CHARCOAL

I REACHED the village in half an hour's brisk canter. Old Saint Peter's Church at one end of the long street, Bat Merry's Tavern at the other, and a score or so of houses between, made up the town.

I speedily found the place I was seeking—a house with a sign bearing the legend: "Law Offices of Thomas Stockton, Esquire, Counsellor-at-Law, and Master in the Court of Chancery, State of New Jersey," and in smaller letters below: "The Morvan Estate."

A black boy ran out to tie my horse and, in response to my question, said Squire Stockton was in.

I found the lawyer in a book-lined office—a man of seventy or thereabouts, as I learned later, but looking younger by twenty years. He sprang to his feet when I introduced myself.

"What! Henry Morvan? You've grown, Henry, since I last saw you. Let's see! You must have been six or eight years old then—no wonder

you've grown. Ha, ha! You were as lively a mannikin for your age as I ever saw. I'm glad to see you—glad you've decided to come back and settle down at the old place. It's been running to seed a little, without a real master. Take a seat—take a seat. Dick"—to his servant—"bring some Jamaica and some water—the flat bottle, mind—not the demijohn. Keep the demijohn for ordinary visitors, Henry, you understand. Yes, the flat bottle, Dick." He squared his shoulders. "Well, sir, a day more and you would have had a call from me. Socially, socially, not professionally. Although everything is ready for an accounting, at any time. What!"

"No hurry for that," I answered. "The accounts are better in your hands than in mine. But, to tell the truth, I have come to see you on business."

"Ah, I see," said the old gentleman. "Dick, put the bottle there. Where are the tumblers? Oh, all right. And, Dick, tell Mr. Fithian to look up those mortgages we were talking about, and to tell anybody who calls that I'm busy."

He waited until the boy had withdrawn and had closed the door of the office. "Business,

Henry, yet not about the accounts? Yes, I dare say I understand. A little ready money—what! Always useful to a young man—even in the country.” He whirled to his desk. “I can let you have a couple of hundred now, and to-morrow——”

“No, no,” I interrupted, the more hastily lest I should yield to the temptation. “I’ve plenty of money on hand. It’s a more serious matter than pocket-money.”

“What! More serious! You haven’t been getting married to some Choctaw squaw?”

“No fear of that,” I laughed.

He squared his shoulders, and dropped into a chair. “Let’s hear it—let’s hear it.”

“Mr. Stockton,” I began, “I’ve come to you about something rather beyond your duty to your client, perhaps; but I’ve come because, to be quite open with you, you’re the only man I can trust.” He bowed gravely, his keen eyes upon me. “I’ve absolutely no friends here—the very house-servants and gardeners are more attached to my cousin Bram than they are to me. That’s natural enough—they hardly know me. And Bram——” I paused.

“Bram Morvan? He’s your friend, isn’t he? What!”

"I fear not," I rejoined. "And that's precisely the reason I want your advice—to let you judge for me."

With that I told him all I knew—which was little enough, and all I suspected—which was a deal more. The lawyer listened, glancing at me sharply from time to time.

"So, you see, it's all in a cloud," I concluded. "There's nothing to lay hold of—that is, nothing I care to lay hold of. Of course, whatever happens, I don't want Bram's name to come out. And there's my cousin, Miss Ferriss Dayton, to consider, too—there's been enough rowing among the Morvans in our grandfathers' time to shame twenty families. I don't want more now." I flattered myself that no one, though twice a Morvan, could have shown himself more solicitous for the family name. "It won't do to raid the old Swede's cabin on the ground that it's a harboring-place for footpads, because, if we caught any of the rascals, they'd be sure to incriminate Bram—perhaps Miss Dayton as well. No, that won't do. Besides, a *posse* couldn't get within five miles of the place before the birds would be flown. I suppose the only thing to do is to await what happens."

“By the Eternal, Henry!—that has a confoundedly Jacksonian sound, but it’s handy. By the Eternal! you ought to be a lawyer. A lucid statement, sir—lucid and most convincing. A just conclusion, too! That is, not in law—no, may be not even just in equity, but for the honor of the family. Bramfield Morvan—what! He’s a wild one, very wild. He’s had a crowd of young hawks hanging around Morvan for years—Lawrence Arnold, and a swarm of riff-raff I didn’t even know the names of.”

“‘Brownie’ Davis, perhaps,” I suggested, “and Bill Garrison, and Lenz.”

“Very likely. It wasn’t for me to interfere, since you had given Bram express permission to live there. But I didn’t think he’d ever go so far as he has. No, no, we must keep it quiet. Your plan is the right one—we’ll do nothing—for the honor of the family. I believe that’s best. What!”

“I hope so,” I answered truthfully. “I don’t see anything else to do.”

“Nor I, but it’s hard on you. Those oafs might really tar and feather you. Such things have happened in the Barrens—more than once, too—more than once.”

"I have a double-barreled Manton in the house," I returned, "and a German military rifle, beside pistols. A flintlock—my grandfather's flintlock—looks serviceable, too. I dare wager I can take care of any callers."

"No, no, it won't do," exclaimed Mr. Stockton. "You can't always be awake. You must have someone to help you. A garrison, that's what you need. A couple of reliable men, say—men who're used to firearms. You can hire them as laborers about Morvan, and let them sleep in the manor-house at night. The three of you might be strong enough to keep off Pine Owls."

"Pine Owls! Bah! If there are any." I did not much relish the idea of calling in others for my defense. "If there are any unfeathered Pine Owls," I repeated.

"Oh, there are—there are," returned the lawyer. "No doubt of that to my mind. A garrison—what! Good idea—excellent." He squared his shoulders and stalked up and down the room. "Let me see—two reliable men. Everybody hunts hereabouts—no trouble about knowing how to shoot. But two *reliable* men—*two*. By the Eternal! I'm no Diogenes, and it makes me blush for the county

to say it, but I only know *one* man who's *reliable*."

"Who is he?"

"Lem Baker—one of your own farmers. He has that white farmhouse in the far corner of your big wheatfield—beyond the three oak-trees."

"I know the place."

"Yes—that's a good property, by the way. He's the man. A sober honest chap—I've hunted quail with him more than once. He hasn't any family—he could as well sleep at Morvan as not. But there ought to be another—ought to be another."

He jerked himself abruptly about. "Why not me, Henry? What! Why not me?"

"You?"

"Yes. Why not—why not? By the Eternal! I haven't had a real brush since our first war with the British. I'd be glad of the chance to fire a shot in earnest once more. There's nobody but my old housekeeper to care what I do." He turned to a cabinet beside his desk. "Look here! I keep my beauties here—just to look at them once in a while for the sake of old times. Yes, yes, to remind me of the days when I'd quarrel with a man because he had hazel eyes—like Mercutio, you re-

member. Did you know I used to be in the navy, Henry? ”

“ I’d forgotten it, sir.”

“ So had I—almost. Ah, here they are. They’ve seen service in their time, too—both in public and private affairs—public and private.” He placed a pair of handsome duelling pistols on the desk. “ What d’ye think of them, Henry? ”

I handled them with becoming reverence. “ I never saw finer in my life.”

“ You’re right. They’re as good as they look, too, and will shoot to a knife edge.” He stood up, buttoning his coat with abrupt gestures. “ No hair triggers, mind you! General Jackson to the contrary notwithstanding. No hair triggers! A gentle, even pull—then you can hit your man when you please—taking it for granted you can hit him where you please.” He took up the nearest weapon and turning his profile toward the tall clock in the corner, extended his pistol-arm stiffly. “ I shot Lieutenant Brooke, R. N., with this very pistol—in Gibraltar, a couple of years after the war—lamed him for life, I’m afraid. So——” He aimed the weapon. “ Your face and body behind your arm at the ‘ One.’ Muzzle down, mind you!—not up

—not up. At the ‘Two’ begin to lift your piece. At ‘Three’”—the hammer clicked—“you smash his knee-cap.”

He put down the pistol with a laugh. “That’s the way I did it. I remember our seconds came to blows afterward—downright fisticuffs. They pummelled each other until they both rolled down a cliff and were well bruised for their pains. I forget what it was all about. But we’d all dined late the night before, and we didn’t sophisticate our liquor in those days. Ha! ha! Henry, I’ll be part of your garrison. Will to-morrow night do to begin?”

“Yes,” I answered, rising to go. “You’ll arrange with Baker for me?”

“I’ll attend to it. I’ll simply tell him there are rumors of thieves about, and you want him to sleep at Morvan until further notice. He won’t ask any questions. What!”

The lawyer waved me adieu from the front stoop, and I rode back up the little street. Several rough-looking men were hanging over the horse-rails of Bat Merry’s Tavern, talking boisterously with a fellow who had just ridden up and was in the act of dismounting. The newcomer had

two or three ugly buck-teeth, and there was something familiar about his face.

After I had passed I realized who it was—the piner, Bill Garrison, whom I had seen in the cabin in Lost Hollow.

I turned in my saddle to make sure, and perceived that the entire group of loungers was gaping after me. They broke into hoarse laughter.

It was a bit of insolence that I did not like, but the yokels were beneath my notice, and I cantered homeward.

Posted on a hickory-tree that formed one of the bounds of my land, a large sheet of paper caught my eye. There was an owl on horseback, rudely sketched in charcoal, and beneath these words:

“Sqier Morvin the weak ant up yet but you got to go anny-how no ritch man can go foolin round his tennunts purty dawter in this hear cownty so I tell you at once we are watchin you and you will pay for it if you fool round your tennunts purty dawter so get out of this cownty

Pine Owl.”

I tore away the miserable scrawl, and trampled it angrily under my horse’s hoofs.

X

FEUDAL DUTIES

THE remainder of that day passed quietly. Bram had been absent since breakfast—so Joshua informed me—nor did he return to dinner. I was glad of it, for I could not have met him in the same complacent spirit I had displayed in the morning. My encounter with Ferriss Dayton, and the accursed insinuations of Pine Owl's last proclamation, had pretty well upset me. I scowled at the venison haunch and glowered over the damasked cider until Joshua must have fancied that Betsey had furnished an ill-cooked meal for once.

Indeed, although but a few days in possession, I almost felt myself to be the veritable master of Morvan. I was able to give orders about the government of the household, to examine accounts, and to scan pictures and books, as if by right. I know not what wild dreams were already dancing through my head, impelling me to make permanent my deception—to turn it from the mad freak of a moment into the settled purpose of a lifetime. Not

only was it possible!—it came to me so naturally that I vow it was not even difficult.

Dinner over, I unpacked my firearms and put them in order, giving even the old Deckard a thorough oiling.

After I had placed the guns in a rack in the hall, there was still something left of daylight—we dined early. I strolled down to the farmhouse beyond the oak-trees to make the acquaintance of the tenant, Lem Baker.

He was sitting on the low porch, comfortably smoking—a sturdy man of about twenty-five or six, with an honest, tanned face. He arose at my approach.

“Good-evening, Baker,” I said. “I’ve come to get acquainted. I am Henry Morvan.”

“I’ve seen you riding about, sir,” replied the man respectfully. “Take the chair—I’ll sit on the step here. Do you mind me smokin’, Squire? Maybe you’ll take a long clay yourself?”

“I believe I will,” I answered. “I haven’t smoked since dinner.”

In a moment he had filled a fresh pipe for me and, after we were seated, we seemed to become friends at once.

“Do you like your farm, Baker?” I asked.

“First rate, sir. ‘Specially, now you’re here.”

“I’ll try not to make a hard landlord.”

“I ain’t afraid of that, Squire.”

“Who keeps house for you, Baker? You aren’t married, are you?”

“No, sir—I sort of do my own work.” The farmer puffed at his pipe, then looked up at me with amusing shyness. “I was comin’ to see you, Squire, about that very thing—after you got settled a bit.”

“Good!” I rejoined. “I’m settled now—as settled as I ever will be. Can I help you in any way?”

“Well, yes, sir.” He hesitated a moment. “You see, Squire, I wanted to ask you if you’re willin’ to have me and Sue Buckaloo get married next month.”

I nearly dropped my pipe in mingled astonishment and joy. “Eh? Who?”

“Sue Buckaloo, sir. She’s Tim Buckaloo’s daughter. He lives on your land, over in the woods—runs a charcoal hill.”

“I know,” I interrupted. “I know them both. By George, yes, Baker! Marry her by all means.

I'll let you have your farm six months rent free, for a wedding present."

"Do you mean it, Squire?"

"I certainly do. I'll make it a year, beginning to-day, if you'll marry her next week. Provided Sue is willing, of course," I added hastily.

"Oh, yes, I've spoken to her—to the old man, too. They're both willin'!" But a year's rent free is a good deal, Squire, and this is the best farm on your place." The man's honest face showed his bewilderment. "You're sure you mean it, sir?"

"I'll tell you the reason, Baker," I said frankly. "You'll pardon me if I speak out about your future wife. It's nothing against Sue, but I've been here long enough to see that she's too pretty to be a piner's daughter, or at any rate, to live in the pines. Then—I'm her landlord, and some cursed billings-gaters have already written to me what they wouldn't dare say to my face. She ought to be married to a good man—the sooner the better."

The farmer nodded gravely. "I understand, Squire—I know just what you mean. You're right—right all the way through. Well, I'll marry her next week, if she's willin', and I guess she'll be." His face shone. "I love her, and she loves me, if

she *is* nothin' but a foolish child—I'll look after her, please God."

I vow the man made me gulp a little. "Please God," I agreed. "And a year's rent free begins to-day."

I went to bed that night as well pleased with myself as I had ever been in my life. I had almost persuaded myself that my kindness to Baker was not certain to prove pure moonshine.

The next I knew, the sun was shining in my eyes, and I heard "cousin" Bram roaring a song as he swaggered below my window. It was the infernal tune the Swedish crone had sung.

"A girl, a bottle, and a gun,
To make the seasons flit—"

I waited to hear no more, but sprang up and began to dress. Was it possible, I thought, that this reckless fellow, all bluff humor and geniality, was in league with a gang of outlaws against me—against Henry Morvan? What could he possibly hope to gain by it?

I found Bram had already had his breakfast and was off with the hounds to draw a thicket on the chance of a stray fox. He had left word he would ride with me if I would wait an hour or two.

"No, thank you, my dear cousin," I muttered to myself. "I prefer my own company." I wondered if it were in any way possible to obtain the company of a certain other "cousin" that day, even if it were only to be taunted as a spy.

I had an inspiration that made me thrill—but first it seemed desirable to tell the Buckaloos of my talk with Lem Baker. I enjoyed playing the kindly lord of the manor.

It was not worth while waiting for my horse to be saddled, so, having given orders to have him ready against my return, I walked along the uplands and struck into the path to the pinner's cottage.

Within a few yards of it, a riderless horse, evidently badly frightened, dashed by me and went careering across the fields. While I stood wondering, Mr. Lawrence Arnold appeared, driven before the fowling-piece of Tim Buckaloo. I fell in beside them.

"What's this?" I demanded sternly, though the matter was clear enough to my mind. "What's the trouble, now?"

"He's here after my gel again," exclaimed Buckaloo angrily. "He sneaked up here early—after I'd gone to work. I came back to git an axe

and caught 'im walkin' along soft through the woods, back o' my house."

"Curse it!" cried Arnold, completely ignoring the piner's complaint. "The fool's frightened my brute so, he won't stop this side of Fairview—I'll have to foot it home." He glanced back at Buckaloo and hurried along as he spoke.

I was so astounded at his indifference to what might well have been considered good cause for shame that he fairly led me by the nose.

"I haven't walked a mile in five years," he stormed, and quickened his pace.

"Then it's high time you did, sir," I rejoined. "You seem to make tolerable progress—with the aid of a fowling-piece. Besides, I venture to say your friends at Merry's Tavern will lend you a horse, if your legs fail you."

It was a chance shot, but seemed to strike home.

"My friends at Merry's Tavern, Mr. Morvan? *My* friends do not live at an ordinary, sir. I don't know what your foreign customs may be." He never ceased his rapid walk.

"I had supposed you to be tolerably acquainted at ordinaries," I said with what I considered rare sarcasm.

“Not at all. Ged! Mr. Morvan, not at all. No gentleman hereabouts less acquainted, sir.” Buckaloo and I nearly had to run to keep up with him.

Then, all at once, I saw his design. He had beguiled me very prettily almost to the edge of the woods. In another rod or two we would be in the fields—in sight of Morvan and of any of the farmhands who might glance our way—in sight even of travelers on the road. In a word, we would be in the public eye, where it would be impossible for me—since I was a Morvan, a proprietor considerate of my own dignity—to quarrel with him.

I clutched him by the arm and brought him to a halt. “Not so fast, sir,” I said. “That will do, Buckaloo—I’ll settle this matter with Mr. Arnold. You can go.”

The piner hesitated, but one glance at my face convinced him that his interests were safe with me. He fell back to a respectful distance.

Arnold, relieved from the threat of Buckaloo’s weapon, faced me sullenly. My sarcastic humor changed to anger as I caught his steady glower.

“Sir,” I said, “for the second time I find you

on my land without invitation—and for a purpose I scorn to name.”

“What of it?” he demanded roughly.

“This!” I answered, and struck him smartly on the jaw.

He turned a fiery red. “By Heaven!——” His wrath choked him.

“Send your second to Mr. Thomas Stockton,” I said. “He’ll act for me.” I turned on my heel.

He stepped in front of me. “Now *you’re* too fast,” he growled. “I’ll fight right enough. But not with swords or pistols—you’re foreigner enough to beat me there. That’s what you’re counting on, eh? No, no. I’m not a Frenchified fencing-master, nor a Dublin duellist neither, but if you mean fight, fight with fists. Mill with me, if you dare—and do it now. There’s a smooth piece of ground in the hollow beyond your boundary hickory.”

If he had thought to frighten me with fisticuffs, he was soon undeceived.

“Any way you like,” I rejoined, “and anywhere you please—the sooner, the better.”

Without more words, we left the pines, and began to hurry across the fields. Bram came running

toward us, a motley collection of hounds at his heels.

"There they go!" he yelled. "Sight 'em, boys—sight 'em!" The dogs leaped about us, and Bram roared with laughter as Arnold and myself, in no mood for foolery, rebuffed them impatiently.

"Good dogs—good dogs! Hark to 'em, lads! Seize 'em fast—fast! Hello, Laurie. Good-morning, Hal. Ho, there! Stop, I say! Where are you two going at that gait? Is this a walking-match? Where are you going?"

"To fight each other," I answered shortly.

"Eh? The deuce you say! You're joking."

"No—we're in earnest. We're about to fight—with fists. Come on!" I took him by the elbow and hurried him along. "I'm glad we met you. I want you to see fair play for both."

"Good Lord, boys!" he protested. "What are you talking about? You can't mean it. You two mustn't fight. It's downright disgraceful for two gentlemen to maul each other like a pair of common piners."

"Nevertheless, it has to be done."

"But you can't have any reason—you only met the other day."

"Our acquaintance is already over ripe."

He appealed to Arnold. "Look here, Laurie. I don't want to interfere in a private matter, but, d'ye see——"

"Save your breath, Morvan," said his friend sullenly. "It's all settled."

After this Bram strode beside us in silence. Now and then I stole a glance at his rueful face. I vow I relished his expression mightily. It was for this I had pressed him into service—to make him realize, if possible, the falseness of his position—a professed friend but a secret enemy.

So presently we reached the grassy hollow beyond the boundary. Here was an open space, screened from the road by second-growth hickory and the branching vines of the wild fox-grape. Thence hostile eyes might easily have spied upon me when I trampled Pine Owl's warning the day before.

Arnold and I removed our coats and neckcloths and gave them to Bram.

"What's it all about, Laurie?" he demanded.

"I'll tell you later," answered the other. He turned to me with a sneer. "If you're particular about your looks, Mr. Morvan, you can apologize.

Probably you don't know I'm counted the best man with the knuckles in the lower counties."

I did not deign to tell him that only the year before I had held my own with the Louisville Spider for full six rounds. It was not for me to play the braggart too. I finished my preparations.

"But, Hal, what's it about?" insisted Bram in desperation.

"You can call it trespass," I said.

"Yes," sneered Arnold, "that'll do. Call it trespassing, or call it poaching. Poaching on what you claim are *your* preserves, eh?"

"I hope to plant my fist against your vile mouth this instant," I rejoined.

We faced each other grimly.

It was all over in five minutes. I had received several hard knocks—and twice I had felled Arnold to the ground.

After the second time, he lay on his face for a moment, then sat up weakly, and glared at me through his rapidly-swelling eyelids.

"Enough!" he said thickly—his lips were badly cut. "Hereafter, I'll respect your wishes, Mr. Morvan."

I took my coat from the awe-struck Bram.

“After all,” went on Arnold, “as her landlord, you’ve first claim to the girl.”

I deigned no reply to this snarl of a beaten cur, but walked rapidly homeward across the fields.

XI

A FENCING LESSON

AT the house I bathed my face—one of my cheeks was somewhat bruised—and donned my handsomest riding-cloak. It was a piece of foppery for which I was soon to pay dear.

In a glove-box, where Joshua had laid them when he unpacked my saddle-bags, I found a pair of lady's gauntlets—plain, but very fine. They had been forwarded from London by the last Baltimore packet—so the young gentleman of Carlisle from whom I had won them had informed me.

I had made the gentleman's acquaintance at a horse-race on the high street of Carlisle. I had seen him brandishing the gloves in air, and proclaiming himself eager to stake them on a black mare against anything of near value. My judgment had been for a little chestnut, and I had accommodated the swaggerer by wagering a pair of bearskin leggings.

As it happened, the chestnut horse had passed the tollgate at the head of the street a full nose

before the black mare, so my young buck had handed me over the gloves—and had sworn savagely in the doing of it. At the time, I had stuffed them carelessly into my saddle-bags, and so had forgotten them until this morning.

Now, wrapping them carefully, I thrust them into my pocket, and descended to the horse-block.

One of my black boys was holding a mount in readiness. He was a merry, quick-eyed darkey, and his interest in my sprucé appearance was so great that he was unable to repress a tremendous grin.

“By the way, Sam,” I said, as he released my stirrup, “I’d forgotten! Tell Joshua to have a couple of bedrooms made up to-night, will you? The—ah—what’s the south-east room?”

“The Ginerol Wash’ton room, sah.”

“Yes, of course—the Washington Room for Mr. Thomas Stockton, and one of the back ones for Lemuel Baker.”

“Comp’ny comin’, Mastah Henry?” grinned the boy. “Yes, sah—Ah’ll tell ’im, sah. Mistah Joshway likes comp’ny. Heigh! but Ah reckon he won’t keer ’bout that kind.”

I was rather amused, for I had already chanced to overhear some bitter passages between the irreverent Sam and Joshua, who, as head of the servants' quarters, was jealous of his dignity.

"Why not?" I demanded.

"Why, 'cause they ain't frens o' Mastah Bram's, Ah reckon. 'Fo' you come, Mastah Henry, they was goins on in this here house. They was so! Mastah Bram's frens like to tore the house down, many's the time."

"What friends?" I asked, with assumed indifference.

"Mastah Bram's frens? Oh, Squiah Ahnold from Fayahview, and Bill Gahison—he's white trash from below here. Yas, sah, and 'Brownie' Davis, too."

He paused and looked at me with such expectancy that I was forced to ask, "Who is he?"

"What! ain't you heard 'bout him yet? He's the bully of this here county, less'n it's Squiah Ahnold. Yes, sah, he kicked a man's face in on'y las' month. He gave me a whippin' onct, damn his hide!" He checked himself. "'Scuse me, Mastah Henry. 'Scuse me, sah."

All this was indeed interesting news. I might

find a valuable ally in Sam. I adjusted my nag's mane and smoothed his neck carelessly.

"I should think Joshua wouldn't have liked such company," I remarked. "They must have caused him a deal of trouble."

"Liked it? Who? Him? Yas, sah, Joshway more'n liked 'em, 'cause then he could git all the wine he wanted to drink. He drinks more Madeery 'n Mastah Bram ever thought o' drinkin'—heigh! and more apple-jack, too, a heap sight." The boy grinned maliciously. "Ain't you ever noticed how kind a sleepy Joshway always is, Mastah Henry?"

I *had* noticed it. Joshua often performed his duty as butler in a sort of maze. The reason for this heaviness, and for "Mistah Joshway's" fondness for the society of Bram's friends was doubtless the same.

I did not care to inquire further. "Well, Sam, remember to tell Joshua. Mr. Stockton will be here for dinner. Baker will be up later."

"Yas, sah—all right, sah." The knowing rascal grinned after me, his eyes on my Spanish cloak and lacquered boots. "Good luck to you, Mastah Henry!"

An hour later I was riding the turnpike of Fairview township. I inquired the way of the first farmer I met.

"Mr. John Dayton?" repeated the man. "Yes, sir. You're right in front of Chestnut Farms, now."

I stared about me. One side of the highway was walled in by a forest of pines. On the other a lane, leading through a chestnut grove, might have given promise of a dwelling, had it not been blocked by a tumble-down rail-fence.

"Where?" I asked. "I don't see any sign of a house."

"It's there, though—behind the chestnuts. Mr. Dayton's a queer one—don't like strangers, they do say, so he keeps the road blocked up the whole time."

I was more puzzled than ever. "How does he manage to get in and out?"

"Well, he hardly ever does, sir. His daughter runs his errands for him, I reckon—she's always ridin' round the country."

"Then she's forced to jump that fence every time she leaves the house?"

"Eh? Oh, no. She takes the back way—it comes out a mile below here. This here front road ain't been open for a good ten years, I reckon."

I thanked him, and after he had jogged on, leaped my horse over the fence, and rode through the chestnut grove.

Sure enough, I soon came upon a sawn-timber house—once a comfortable farmstead, but now little better than a ruin. The woodwork had seen no paint these ten years, several panes of glass were broken, and the leads were gone from the gaunt windows. At one side, the very well-curb was falling to decay.

"No wonder John Dayton doesn't like visitors," I thought. "This is indeed hard on any man's pride."

Behind the house I caught a glimpse of a ramshackle stable, but neither in dwelling nor outbuilding could I detect a sign of life.

I called loudly again and again in the fashion of the country: "Hello! the house!" Only the echo of my own voice came back.

Thinking I must have been directed to the wrong farmstead, I had half a mind to ride off, when

a number of chickens clucked peacefully into view from the vicinity of the stable. Where fowls were there must be people.

I dismountd and, the knocker being missing, beat on the door with the butt of my whip. There was no response, and, growing impatient, I thundered till the whole house rang.

At last slow footsteps sounded within. The door swung open, and an old man confronted me. He was tall and broad-shouldered, but halted on a cane. His coat of plum-colored broadcloth was well-nigh threadbare, but scrupulously clean, and with every button in place. He held his head with the peculiar side cock of the partly-deaf, but his eyes looked brightly out beneath level brows. It was Ferriss Dayton's father beyond a doubt.

"The back door, my man," said my "cousin" John sharply. "Tradespeople at the back." Before I could answer he seemed to take in my rather dandified appearance. "Oh, your pardon, sir! I took you to be the green-grocer's boy from the village. You knocked, I believe, sir?" His manner was of the coldest.

"Yes," I responded. "Do I speak to Mr. John Dayton?"

"Sir?"

"Are you Mr. Dayton?" I repeated loudly.

"I am. Perhaps you do not know, sir, that we receive no visitors."

"I hope you'll except me. I am Henry Morvan, and I've come——"

"Certainly, sir, this is my home."

"I say I've come to——"

"Sir? I must trouble you to speak louder. My hearing is not good."

"I am your cousin, Henry Morvan."

"Ah! Mr. Irving?"

"Morvan—Henry Morvan, your——"

"I do not remember your name, Mr. Irving, although no doubt it is well-known in the county. Since my health has forbidden my going out I have forgotten many names. I regret we receive no visitors. Good-morning, sir."

He had actually started to close the door in my face. I managed to detain him.

"Miss Dayton!" I exclaimed in desperation.

"Sir?"

"Your daughter—Miss Ferriss—I——"

"Ferriss? Ah, you are a friend of hers?"

"I want to be," I shouted.

“If you have come at my daughter’s invitation, we must make an exception,” he said. “My daughter’s invitation is mine, sir.” He bowed formally as if discharging all obligation by such condescension. “I think I have not heard her mention your name, Mr. Irving.”

“I met her only recently.”

“Ah, yes, of course—otherwise she would certainly have spoken of a gentleman of your fashion. I regret I cannot offer you a glass of wine—my cellar is just now empty, sir. I will tell Miss Dayton you called. She is not now at home.” He shut the door, and I heard his slow footsteps echoing down the hall.

Considerably dashed, I returned to my horse. For some reason, I had not reckoned on Ferriss being from home. I was about to mount, when the rollicking laugh of a negro sounded from the vicinity of the stable. The boy might know something of Ferriss.

There was no one in the stable—I swept the poor structure at a glance. But the laugh sounded again, and I made my way to the rear. Here, in a little brick-paved courtyard, I came on a pretty sight.

My Lady of the Spur was engaged in a mock combat with a black boy of fifteen or sixteen. Each held a riding-whip, and the two were facing each other in fencing position. At the moment I peered in upon them Ferriss, her skirt caught up in her left hand, had forced the delighted boy into a corner, and was lunging at him with a series of stamps and huzzas that rendered him almost helpless from laughter.

"Stand up to it, Jerry!" she cried. "Keep your arm out. Ha! *Touché—touché!* Don't laugh so. Now then. Ha!"

"Ya ha!" shouted the lad. "How kin Ah he'p laughin', Miss Ferriss? Blame 'f yo' ain't enough to make a rabbit laugh!"

"Lunge! lunge, Jerry!" she ordered. "That's it. Well parried! Now—over your heart—*touché!*"

"Bravo!" I cried, advancing from the stable-door. "A very good thrust, My Lady of the Spur!"

She whirled about. "You!"

"Most humbly at your service."

"You!" she repeated. "What are *you* doing here?"

“Admiring your fencing.”

She eyed me, her cheeks a little pale, her brows in a straight line. Then a sudden demon of mischief awoke in her eyes.

“My fencing? You’re laughing at me. But face me yourself, if you dare.”

I snatched the whip from Jerry’s fingers. “I’ll dare. A pair of gloves against your spur you can’t score a hit.”

“Done! done! *En garde*, monsieur!”

She caught up her skirt and rushed upon me like a fury. Indeed, so fierce was her attack that almost before I could defend myself, she had driven me half across the courtyard. To confess the truth, I was more occupied in watching her spurred boot advancing in little stamps, and in the merry glance of her gray eyes, than I was in parrying her thrusts.

Presently she gave a dexterous lunge.

“*Touché! touché!* monsieur! I’ve won!”

“Yes,” I said, lowering my weapon, “and fairly, too. That tierce was worthy of Chevalier George himself. You shall have the gloves.”

The fire died out of her eyes, and she again surveyed me steadily. “Why are you here?”

"To see you," I answered.

She turned on the stableboy who was staring with open mouth. "Jerry, go give Grayboy a rub-down. Mr. Morvan, we can talk more freely elsewhere."

I followed her from the courtyard. Here was an ancient apple-orchard, the trees gnarled and twisted with age. A bench encircled one of them, and on this we sat down.

Below the orchard, the ground fell in a gradual slope to a brook half a mile away. Along the uplands, the maples flamed on every knoll, and the hickories showed golden in the Indian Summer haze. Through a gap in the ridge, we could catch a gleam of the distant bay.

For a moment, Ferriss stared out across the valley, then faced me.

"Now, we can talk. Why have you come here, Mr. Morvan? About that ridiculous picture?"

"No. I've come to call upon you," I repeated.

"But why?"

"Cousin Ferriss," I answered, smiling, "is it so great a wonder? Why does any man call upon any woman? He'd find it hard to explain. If you press me, I'll be open with you—I've come be-

cause I've been longing to see your face, and to hear your voice."

"Is that all? Impossible!"

"You wrong your own charm by saying so. I've only heard your voice when you've chided me—yes, and you've given me only frowns, but if I'm not favored by smiles and kind words from you, I take what you deign to grant me."

"Well, sir," she said with sudden scorn, "do my poor face and voice meet the Squire of Morvan's approval?"

I sighed contentedly. "You know they do."

"I know nothing of the kind," she frowned. "I can't equal you in fine talk, sir—I wouldn't choose to do so, if I could. I would have thought the opinion I expressed of Mr. Henry Morvan yesterday might have daunted even his impertinent spirit."

"Cousin Ferriss," I said gently, "have I ever spoken an impertinent word to you? Have I ever given you one impertinent look?" I waited for her answer, but she found none. "No," I went on, "you know I haven't. What's more, Cousin, I've never owned a thought of you that your own mother mightn't have known."

She looked rather conscience-stricken. "Your presence here—that is an impertinence," she said faintly.

"Only because you make it so. I've come to see you—without any hard thoughts of you, Ferriss, although I have some right to them. I've come to see if I can't be of service to you in some way."

"No," she answered, still faintly, "you cannot."

"I notice you ride a deal," I insisted. "Won't you let me lend you a horse? I'll send one over every day, if you like. Let me do so little for you."

"Thank you—no. Grayboy is enough for me."

"Isn't there anything your father would like—some books, perhaps? He looks like a man who loves his library."

She started. "Have you seen my father?"

"Yes—at the door."

"I wonder he didn't drive you away. Your name is hateful to him."

"I couldn't make him understand who I was, though I tried hard enough. He was bent on taking me for a Mr. Irving."

“No wonder! In his worst dreams, my father could never imagine that *you* would dare to call *here*. Books for *him*—from *you*? He would throw them in the fire.”

I saw I was on dangerous ground. “Then suppose I bring some foils over and fence with you. That courtyard is just the place.”

She gave me the ghost of a smile. “You aren’t a match for me.”

“No,” I agreed eagerly, “but I can learn to be. By the way, you won that bout, and the bet. I happen to have a pair of gloves with me. The Goddess of Chance put them in my hands, but I’m glad to yield them to another sort of goddess.”

I pulled the package from my pocket, and unfolded the gauntlets. She gave a gasp of delight.

“Oh! aren’t they lovely!” She fingered them in admiration. “Danish leather, isn’t it?”

“Try them on,” I suggested.

She did so, while I looked on, congratulating myself on the success of my stratagem.

“They seem to be a good fit,” I remarked.

“Perfect—perfect!” she exclaimed. “How odd that you should have had them with you!

They're just what I needed. My old gloves were quite worn out, and——"

She stopped. Her teeth pressed her lower lip so fiercely that the flesh went white. She tore off the gauntlets and flung them on the bench where I sat.

"Oh!" she said. "Oh! how could you!"

"I pay my bets," I returned doggedly. "If I had won, I would have taken your spur."

She ignored my reply. "You insult me, sir," she cried. "I hope you are satisfied at last. You come here and laugh at our home—that pitiful skeleton of a home! You make sport of my old father! You offer me your horses, your foils, your books—only to laugh at us! You come here flaunting your fine airs and fine cloak, and—and"—she choked—"you sneer at me by reminding me that *I* go dressed like a beggar. Sir," she said very pitifully, "perhaps it will amuse you to know that I have, besides this riding-habit, but one gown in the world."

"Oh, for God's sake!" I cried. "For God's sake, Ferriss! don't talk to me so."

"If you have a spark of honorable feeling left in you," she said, "you will leave me at once."

“Ferriss!”

“Go—please.”

There was nothing for me to do but obey.

As I mounted my horse, I heard a faint call.

“Oh, the gloves! You have left the gloves, sir.”

But I pretended not to hear. At least, she should have some decent covering for those little hands, whether she liked it or not.

XII

THE RED BANTAM

I HAD food enough for reflection as I let my nag take his own gait for home.

Indeed, it was high time I should chart my course—to determine whither I was drifting, before I ran upon the rocks, or, a far worse thing, before I let someone else fall foul of them.

Tom Bell, convicted highwayman, had taken the name and place of Henry Morvan, heir to the Manor. For this, without mention of his former peccadilloes, the said Tom Bell would merrily swing from a leafless tree, were he to be overtaken in such arrant knavery. Small use then to plead it an idle frolic! The law would take no cognizance of humor so fantastic.

Nevertheless, the false Morvan had thus far—saving the sheer impudence of his imposture—acted not unworthily of the name he had stolen, in so far as he had defended his position against a set of rogues. So far so good! Tom Bell could hang, if hang he must, with a good grace, and with some claim to be held a man of honor.

Hitherto, then, I had blinded myself with the thought that, although I was keeping the rightful heir—and that heir a woman—from her property, yet she deserved no more of any honest man. Through some fog of circumstance I could not pierce, she was in close league with the scum of the county. Let her suffer for it!

But to-day the sophistical scales had a little fallen from my eyes. I was deliberately seeking Ferriss Dayton's company—I was thrusting myself upon her. I had to confess that I would have abandoned my imposture almost at once, had it not been for her. Nay, and what is more! would I have entered upon so mad a scheme at all, had not the Lady of the Spur met me at Pole Tavern?

I was in certain pursuit of Ferriss. And with what object? What hope? I could not mean honorably by her, for I was a convicted outlaw, whom only to know was felony. I began to suspect that I was acting very vilely.

But the devil must have bestrode the saddle behind me that day, to whisper in my ear. Was I not a felon already? What did another sin, more or less, matter? The girl was charming—ador-

able! To be sure, she hated me at present, but she might be tamed.

I thought of her rounded body, her length of limb, and the sweet curves of her neck. That proudly-poised head—would it not be incomparably satisfying to have it bend—for me? But suppose those gray eyes should know me for what I was? Intolerable scorn would burn my very soul!

“No matter! no matter!” I struck my clenched hand on the pommel of my saddle, and cried aloud. “By God! I’ll go through with it!”

My roan, moving at a swift walk, had brought me along the postroad to a point where a tumble-down building marked the intersection of a country lane. From the horseshoe nailed above the door, and the many pieces of rusty iron lying about, I took it to be a crossroads smithy.

The door was closed against the autumn air, but a burst of hearty laughter from within drew me to dismount and enter. I had a notion to learn of what sort of stuff the ordinary people of the countryside were made.

The place was as dark as a pocket, but as soon as I had entered, I understood that, although it had once been the neighborhood smithy, and might still

sometimes serve as such—indeed, a fire was at that moment smouldering in a half-ruined forge—yet its chief uses had become quite different.

A half dozen men were squatted in a circle—wherein no less a person than my “cousin” Bram was engaged in matching a couple of gamecocks. At one side, half in, half out the shadows of the forge, two men were playing a round of cards. Bram’s cries of encouragement completely drowned the noise of my entrance.

“Now, then, Hickory!” he exclaimed. “To him, little bantam! Back you go, Cæsar. Gad! he deserves the name, don’t he? If that stroke had gone home, the girls would have been wearing Hickory’s tailfeathers to-morrow. Come, come, easy, boy!”

With practised hands he snatched the two little warriors apart, and balanced them at arm’s length, while another man sprayed a mouthful of water over them.

“D’ye see, Acton,”—Bram spoke over his shoulder. “Cæsar has the red spots on the gold-brown saddle, there? And how the plumes are shiny black?—blue-black, mind. I tell you, he’s the right breed—real Mandarin, I’ll swear to it. Now,

old Hickory's a regular crow—sooty-black all over. Like a charcoal-burner, eh? Are you ready?"

"Ready and waitin'," retorted the other. "I'll bet you a Spanish dollar even on Cæsar, Squire, just to make the game level."

"Done!" cried Bram. "I'll make it five, if you'll stand that much."

"No. One's enough for me."

I had thought my entrance had passed quite unnoticed, but a man who was crouched at my feet now spoke.

"Here's Squire Henry, Mr. Bram—he'll lay you five, I dare say—on *Cæsar*, eh?"

I fancied I detected a particular significance in the emphasis laid on the word. However, I spoke up at once.

"Yes. Five dollars on Cæsar against Old Hickory."

A sort of suppressed murmur went round the circle. I saw the light reflected from the smooth face of the knave of clubs as it hung suspended in a card-player's hand. The suspended hand, and a pair of soiled boots, were all that I could make out in that corner. The hand was lowered, and the boots shifted uneasily.

Bram, alert at the first words of the man beside me, stared up, a bantam in each palm. The lights and shadows from the forge confused the changing lines of his face. For an instant there was silence.

"Eh, what?" he cried at length. "Hello, Henry! Is that you? Come to see a main, have you? Good for you. Acton, let my cousin pass there, will you?"

The fellow made way for me civilly enough, and I found myself inside the circle.

"Don't let me interrupt you, gentlemen," I said. "Five on Cæsar against Hickory—is that the bet?"

"That's it," said the man Acton. "And the best man wins." He swept a glance about the group. "Ha, ha! I mean the best bird, ch, boys?"

One of the card-players spoke from the shadow. "Best man or best bird—what's the difference? Cæsar's a Morvan cock, ain't he, and Hickory's from the swamp. Let 'em fight it out. Are you game for another five for the honor of Morvan, Squire?"

Plainly the words were addressed to me rather than to Bram. There was a certain contempt, or was it truculence?—in the speaker's tone; besides,

the voice was vaguely familiar to me. Nevertheless, I answered without turning my head.

“Done, sir! Double with you, if you like.”

There was no response. Bram broke promptly in. “To it, then! Give ’em another spray, Morris. Cæsar too, man! Fair play’s a jewel. Now, stand clear everybody!” He tossed the two fowls lightly to the ground. Without an instant’s hesitation they began to fight.

Unlike the custom in some parts of the country, we of West Jersey never fight our cocks with artificial spurs. Fitted only with the weapons of Nature, the birds ordinarily can do each other little real harm. A main is apt to be a long one, often ending without much damage to either contestant.

It bade fair to be a matter of the same kind between Cæsar and Hickory. Although the birds struck, leaped, and wrestled with fury, only here and there was a russet-and-gold hackle torn from the red bantam’s neck, or did a crimson spot stain the black cock’s sinister plumage. They were evenly matched.

After a fierce rally, when the black cock, stimulated by a chorus of cries and shouts, had driven Cæsar almost against my knee, I became aware of a strange alteration in the group of spectators.

Consciously or unconsciously, the country people had ranged themselves behind Old Hickory, as bottle-holders back up their principal in the prize-ring. I was left the sole supporter of the gallant red bantam, while Bram, as an impartial cock-master, crouched midway between the two parties.

Thus it was Cæsar against Hickory, the red game against the black cock, the Morvan bird against the bird from the swamp. I saw now that, in some fashion, the main was a counterpart of the struggle between myself and the piners. The idea served to amuse me.

“High, boy!” the men were shouting. “Go it, Blackie! You’re the swamp bully. You’re the big cock of the Barrens. Cut ’im up, boy! Cut ’im up!”

I opposed my cries to theirs. “At him, Cæsar! Jump, my beauty! Aha! well done. Down with the black. The russet forever!”

Thus encouraged, the two birds faced each other desperately, neither yielding an inch. The excitement of the gamesters grew—even the card-players in the corner had ceased to pretend any interest in their game of old sledge. The toes of the soiled boots were turned squarely toward the cock-pit.

The black cock was the stronger bird, but Cæsar, with equal courage, possessed a prime advantage of the game-fowl—he could outleap his opponent. This saved him again and again from Old Hickory's savage rushes.

After the black had for the third time failed to strike his spur into the golden-brown neck, a muttered oath arose from the shadows. "See that!" growled the truculent voice with an impatience out of all proportion to the apparent cause. "Damned if the red one won't get him, first thing we know!"

The reply was inaudible, but its tenor was clear from the next words that came to me, still in a muttered growl. "It means a heap, I tell you. I believe in signs. I've a notion to shy my stick at Cæsar, Squire or no Squire."

In spite of myself, I felt a sudden qualm—the voice was that of "Brownie" Davis. With sharpened eyes I scrutinized the faces nearest me. Garrison's and Lenz' were not among them, nevertheless, I suspected that I was in the midst of enemies. This crossroads smithy was a lonely place and as dark as a wolf's mouth. I began to wish myself well out of it.

Whether Davis would have knocked over the feathered champion of Morvan as he threatened, or whether, perhaps, his stick would have played a devil's tattoo upon my own skull, I never knew. Cæsar settled the matter.

Old Hickory made a savage rush. Cæsar leaped high and, over the other's very head, spurred at his eye. The black cock fell dead upon the spot.

In the little smithy, a sullen silence fell—a silence presently broken by the triumphant crow of the red bantam.

“Well, gentlemen,” I said easily, “the Morvan strain showed after all. A good main! I'll leave it to my cousin here to collect the bets for me. Bram, use the money to buy all hands some of Bat Merry's best, will you? Good-day, gentlemen.”

I walked quietly to the door, mounted my horse and trotted away—and still no one but myself had spoken.

Indeed, I was glad enough to breathe free air again, for I had recognized the pair of soiled boots, half-revealed, half-hidden by the light of the forge fire. Where “Brownie” Davis muttered sulkily to Lawrence Arnold in the dark was no place for me to linger.

XIII

PINE OWLS

MR. THOMAS STOCKTON came prompt to the dinner hour. With him arrived his servant, Dick, bearing a shotgun as well as a couple of portman-teaus, across his saddlebow. Bram and I met the lawyer at the door.

“Good-evening, gentlemen. Good-evening,” he called. He dismounted, and shook hands heartily. “I’ve brought my boy, Dick, with me, you see.” His eyebrows arched significantly. “Dick’s a reliable man, Henry. What!”

“Good,” I returned. “I’ve been telling Bram about the threatening letters I’ve received from the Pine Owls. I told him I had let you persuade me into keeping a garrison in the house. I think it’s all nonsense, though.”

“Of course—it’s foolishness,” said Bram. “Gad! I wouldn’t clutter up the house with a lot of niggers and farmhands. I’d see all the fool letter-writers in the Jerseys hanged first.”

“But you were warning me against footpads

about here only the other day," I remarked innocently.

"Eh? Well, you know my nerves weren't in good shape that morning." He gave his hearty laugh. "No, no—if I were in your place, I'd kick your whole garrison out of doors—not meaning you, Mr. Stockton, of course. I'm not saying but what some of the lads of the neighborhood may come up with a calthumpian band some night—they do that much to every bride and groom—ha, ha! But as for anything serious, it's all balderdash."

"I believe you're right," I returned. "But I've made all arrangements, so I'll let them stand as they are. By the way, Bram, what sort of humor did you leave Mr. Lawrence Arnold in?"

Bram's hearty manner quieted at once. He eyed me with pronounced respect. "So, so, Henry—so, so. Gad! I wouldn't have believed there was a man in the world could have given Laurie Arnold such a bruising. He's so so."

This was not very definite, but I had expected nothing more. I turned to Mr. Stockton, who was being helped off with his greatcoat.

"Dick is reliable, is he, sir?"

“Reliable as the day is long,” said the lawyer. “Funny I didn’t think of Dick before. He’s as quick as lightning, silent as the grave, good as gold, and the best quail shot in the county, white or black. What! He’s brought his own firearm, Henry.”

“So I see. Put it in that rack, Dick. Hang your powder and shot on the antlers. Now, you know the way to the kitchen, don’t you? Tell Joshua to give you everything you want to eat. If he doesn’t, let me know, and we’ll lock him up in the potato-cellar.”

The man departed, grinning, and I led Mr. Stockton to the Washington Room.

“So you’ve taken Bram into your confidence, Henry,” said the lawyer, as he got himself into a ruffled shirt. “Told him frankly about Pine Owl? What! Ha, ha! I protest you ought to be a Justice of the Supreme Court. You have a legal mind.”

“I had to make some explanation of our warlike preparations.”

“Precisely. Excellent. I notice our friend, Bramfield, is a little soured by said preparations.”

“He’s been keeping close to the house all the afternoon—ever since I got back from a call I made this morning. I think I impressed him early in the day.”

“Bram? Impressed him? How so?”

I told him the happenings of the morning, omitting as immaterial a part of the details of my interview with Ferriss Dayton.

“Hum-m! Lawrence Arnold has met his master at last,” said the lawyer. “By the Eternal! I wish I’d seen the mill. What! I’ve been making some inquiries about him since I saw you. I couldn’t understand why he should mix up in this business—he’s not the man to do it simply out of friendship for Bram Morvan.”

“Have you learned anything?”

“Yes, I have. Arnold is mortgaged—mortgaged to the eyes, Henry, and sinking to the hairline. That’s it. What! Too much Santa Cruz up here at Morvan—too much old sledge at Bat Merry’s—too much cock-fighting in the old blacksmith’s shop—and Lalages and Phrynnes here and there in the lower counties. That’s where his money’s gone—rum and cards, and women. Mortgaged to the eyes.”

Joshua knocked on the door to tell us that Master Bram sent word to come to dinner for Heaven's sake, before the goose was cold.

We discussed the dinner at length—we were all strong men, not ashamed of our appetites. When we came to the hickorynuts and Madeira I sent Joshua—for some reason unusually alert that night—to find out if Baker had yet arrived. In a moment the farmer himself appeared.

“On hand, I see, Baker. Are you comfortable?”

“Yes, sir,” he answered. “I’m taking a smoke on the back porch.”

“That’s right. Did you get up to the Buckaloos to tell them the news to-day? I started, but didn’t reach there.”

The honest fellow shifted his feet in embarrassment. “Yes, sir. I told ’em. It’s all right. Sue’s willin’, and so’s the old man.” He planted himself squarely. “Squire, I heard about how you beat Squire Arnold—I can’t say how much I’m obliged to you.”

“I’m glad I was on the spot, Baker.”

When he had drunk a glass of wine and had left us, Bram looked up sharply.

“What was Baker talking about? He said something about Sue being willing. Willing for what?”

“Didn’t I tell you,” I returned easily. “They’re to be married next week.”

“The deuce they are!” Bram’s face went a yard long. “The deuce they are!” he repeated.

“What’s the matter? Don’t you think it’s a suitable match?”

“Eh? Oh, yes, it’s suitable, right enough. The news sort of bowled me over because—well, hang it, Hal, only a week ago, Baker would have come to me about it, d’ye see? The king is dead, long live the king! Ha, ha! I’ll get used to it, after a while.”

I said no more on the subject, and by and by we adjourned to the library. Bram stuck to us like a brother, and I had no opportunity for any private conversation with Mr. Stockton.

When the lawyer and my worthy “cousin” engaged in a game of cribbage, I took occasion to write a letter at the secretary in the corner. I had turned the phrases in my mind ever since I had ridden hastily away from John Dayton’s shabby farmstead.

"My Lady of the Spur," (I wrote):— "I implore you to read this through. I left you—since you bade me—so hastily this morning that I forgot to say something of the greatest gravity. It is this—I beg you not to trust the woman, Mary Pedersen. Do not go near the cabin in Lost Hollow. I solemnly swear to you, the woman will destroy you, if she can. She is as treacherous as her snake. This I know. I cannot tell you how, for it would shame you too much to learn it. Cousin, I pray you by your own sweet self, to have nothing to do with that hag—but, if you must, at least eat or drink nothing she offers you.

"My Lady, I will not anger you by again laying my service at your feet, but, remember, if you need me, I am still your devoted cousin, though you hate me.

"Henry Morvan."

I pulled the bellrope that hung by the desk—Bram started at the distant jangle of the bell—and sent Joshua for Sam. In a few minutes the boy came in, greatly awed by my sudden summons.

"Mistah Joshway say yo' want me, Mastah Henry."

"Yes, I do, Sam. Come close to the secretary." I lowered my voice. "Can you keep a secret?"

The boy's eyes rolled. "Yas, sah. Ah reckon Ah kin."

"Then, here's a note I want you to carry for me—not to-night—to-morrow morning will do—to-morrow morning early. Do you understand?"

The knowing rascal showed a tremendous row of ivory teeth as he took the note. "Yas, sah. Whah's the lady live, Mastah Henry?"

"Who said it was for a lady?"

"Haw, haw!" the darkey laughed softly. "Ah seen yo' ridin' off in yo' cou'tin' clo'es this mawnin', sah."

"I suppose you know Mr. John Dayton over in Fairview township—at Chestnut Farms?"

"Yas, sah. Ah been there many a time. My brother wo'kes there."

"What—Jerry? Is he your brother?"

"'Deed, yes. Jerry, he's my brother, yas, sah. Is the lettah fo' Mastah John, Mastah Henry?"

"You know it isn't. Take that note over to-morrow morning early, and give it to Miss Ferriss, Sam. And look here! don't let Mr. Dayton see you do it. You understand?"

"Cou'se, Ah do," grinned the darkey.

"Very well—and wait for an answer, unless you have to wait a week."

"Ah'll do it—Ah'll do it, certain."

"And Sam, can Jerry keep a quiet tongue in his head?"

"Who? Him? Ah reckon he kin, if Ah tell

'im to. He better believe he kin. Ah'll lam the life out'n him, if he don't. Yas, sah, he'll keep his mouf shet."

"Then tell him to see that no harm comes to Miss Ferriss—that nobody annoys her in any way. If any trouble ever happens to her, he's to let me know—I intend to send you over every day. But you must keep out of Miss Ferriss' sight—unless I send you with a note like this."

"All right, Mastah Henry. Ah got it all straight, Ah reckon. Ah'll git it to her without lettin' the ole man know 'bout it. Yas, sah, all right. Good-night, sah."

I worked over my business papers some time longer. It was a matter I had foreseen—that I would be called upon to sign deeds and receipts, and must do so in a handwriting that was not that of the real Henry Morvan. The first time I had been forced to subscribe my name, therefore, I had made a great to-do over the rheumatism that cramped my fingers until I could hardly read my own signature. Not the least suspicion had been aroused, either then or since.

Now I finished my business, and then lounged in my chair, dreamily watching Mr. Stockton at

cards. Presently I realized that the game was solitaire.

"Hello!" I said. "Where's Bram? I thought the two of you were at cribbage."

"So we were," responded the lawyer, "but Mr. Bram thought the pack was a little stale, and went off to his room for a fresh one. He's been gone an unconscionable time, I must say."

A picture of Henry Morvan's father hung above the fire-place. With my eyes on this, I dreamed and planned, while Mr. Stockton struggled to keep from cheating himself, until at length Bram returned with fresh cards.

"Here they are," he said. "I had to rummage through a whole litter of my stuff before I could find 'em."

He and the lawyer were soon deep in cribbage. Mr. Stockton was moving up the pegs, triumphantly chanting: "fifteen, two—fifteen, four—and no more," when we heard excited voices in the hall.

Bram threw down his cards. "What's that?"

"Joshua and Sam carrying on one of their eternal disputes, I suppose. I'll have to discipline those boys, if this sort of thing keeps on."

The voices rose higher—I detected a woman's

tones. With a sudden suspicion I ran to the door and threw it open. Three or four of the domestics rushed in, and in their midst Sue Buckaloo, her eyes streaming with tears, and every mark of fear and woe on her pretty face.

“Oh, Squire! Oh, gentlemen!” she cried. “My dad!” She burst out sobbing.

“What’s the matter?” I demanded.

Joshua began volubly to explain. “Oh, sumpin skeer her, Mastah Henry. Guess it must a been somebody with a jack-o’-lante’n. Kain’t be nuffin much. I tole her she mustn’t ’sturb you but——”

“Hold your tongue!” I roared. “Go, send Baker here, at once. Now Sue, stop crying. What’s the matter?”

“Oh, Squire! The Pine Owls got dad!”

“What!”

“Yes, sir. They came in and beat him ’most to death. And they tied me to a chair—and I couldn’t get loose for a long time. He’s hurt awful—and he’s up there now. Oh, Squire, they all had their heads in black bags.”

“Sit in that chair, Sue. We’ll go get your father. Is that you, Betsey? Look after her, will you? Where’s Baker?”

"I'm here, Squire." The farmer pushed through the ring of frightened servants. He patted Sue's shoulder with awkward tenderness. "Never mind, Sue, girl. All right, Squire."

"I'm going up to the cottage—you'll want to come with me, of course. Mr. Stockton, I'll leave you and Dick to guard the house."

"Only two of you, Henry?" said the lawyer. "Not enough. What! Pine Owl may be waiting for you up there."

"We'll have to risk it. Wait! Sam, would you be afraid to shoot a man?"

"No, sah," answered the boy promptly. "Not if you tole me to shoot 'im."

"Then you can come. That's three of us, Mr. Stockton—and Bram, of course—four."

"Yes, of course," said the lawyer. "Almost forgot Bram."

Leaving Sue to the care of Joshua's wife, we speedily armed ourselves. The lawyer, a dueling-pistol in each hand, accompanied us to the porch-steps.

"If they attack you, and outnumber you, shoot to kill, Henry. If not, fire at their legs. Never kill a man, if you can avoid it honorably."

The four of us hurried across the fields and through the strip of woods. I fancied that Bram hung back a little, but I took no outward notice of such lagging.

We approached the piner's cottage with woeful lack of precaution. Notwithstanding, there was no rush of masked men upon us, nor volley of shots from the thickets.

The door of the cabin was wide open—as Sue had left it when she had run for help. From the dark interior came guttural sounds.

“Hear ’im groanin’!” exclaimed Sam.

“No, no,” cried Baker. “He’s swearin’, not groanin’. If Tim Buckaloo can still swear, he ain’t very far gone.” He rushed into the cottage as he spoke. “Tim, are you bad hurt?”

“Who’s that?” demanded Buckaloo fiercely.

“Me—Lem Baker—and the Squire. Are you hurt?”

“Not to speak of,” replied Buckaloo. “Light the candle—it’s on the table there. I’m tied up to some chairs, but there ain’t no bones broke, I guess.” He swore savagely. “I’m well enough to git even with some of ’em.”

The glow of the candle speedily lit the room.

Buckaloo, tied hand and foot, was doubled face downward over a couple of chairs. His naked back was cut and bleeding from the blows of hickory rods. In spite of his reassuring words, he had received a cruel flogging.

Baker quickly severed the lashings, and we helped the charcoal-burner to a sitting posture. Bram wandered uneasily about the room.

“Buckaloo, my poor fellow,” I said, “who’s done this deviltry?”

The man straightened himself painfully—his wrists and ankles were badly swollen where the ropes had gripped them. “Some of them damn Pine Owls, Squire—that’s what they call ’em. Every one of ’em with a black bag over his head. The Lord knows why they picked on a poor man like me. Curse ’em!”

“Did you recognize any of them?”

“No—I ain’t sure. One of ’em must a been ‘Brownie’ Davis, though. He’s got a hand in all the doin’s round here. One fellow rode right up to the door and called me. I went out to see what was wanted, o’ course, and the whole crowd rushed me from both sides. I was down before I knew it. Did they hurt Sue?”

"No, she's safe in my house. Did the man on horseback wear a mask, too?"

"No, sir, or I would a seen it, and had a chance to dodge back." He lowered his voice. "I ain't sure, sir—it was too dark to tell much—but it looked like Squire Arnold."

"Squire Arnold!" exclaimed Bram from behind. "Oh, come, Buckaloo! That can't be. You saw crooked on account of that row you had with him this morning."

"Well, mebbe it wasn't him. He looked like it to me, but I can't swear to it."

"I should think not, man," returned Bram. "Laurie Arnold? By Gad! you'll be thinking it was me next."

"You and him look a good deal alike in the dark," said the charcoal-burner sullenly.

By dint of hard rubbing, Sam had restored the circulation to the other's feet. He stood up and walked stiffly about.

"Get your shotgun, Buckaloo," I said. "You must come back to Morvan with us. Sue and you must stay there for a while."

"I ain't afraid of such——"

"I know you aren't. But Sue is—and ought

to be. I'll have you sleep in the manorhouse for a few nights. Give him his shirt, Baker. Are you all ready? Then we'll move. Keep an eye on the bushes!"

In ten minutes we were back in the hall.

Sue wept and exclaimed over her father, while Mr. Stockton drew me aside.

"All safe, Henry. I wouldn't have minded if those rascals had showed their teeth here. I'd have tried my pair of beauties on them. What! What are you going to do with *her*, Henry?"

"Sue? I'll have some rooms made up for her and her father. They'll be safer here than they would be up there in the woods. Besides, Buckaloo will be a valuable addition to the garrison."

The lawyer shook his head. "It won't do, Henry. No, no, it won't do. If that girl stays in the house, it'll set all the tongues in the county wagging." He squared his shoulders. "Bound to—bound to! Look at her—a regular wood-nymph. What! She's too pretty—and you're her landlord."

"Confound it!" I rejoined. "I believe you're right, sir. What the devil's to be done, though? It will be murder to let them go back to that lonely cottage of theirs."

"I'll tell you. The very thing—excellent! if it is my own idea. Didn't you say she and Baker are engaged to be married?"

"Yes—they're to be married next week."

"Why not to-morrow? What! Why not to-morrow? By the Eternal! to-morrow's Sunday, too. Just the thing. I'll send word by Dick to Garrett—he's the rector—been here twenty years. I'll let Garrett know early to-morrow, and we'll have 'em married off at Saint Peter's in proper style, by noon. Then they can live here *ad infinitum*. What do you say?"

"Sue!" I cried, almost in a shout. "Baker, Buckaloo! Listen, all of you. Buckaloo, we'll send you upstairs, and have your back attended to in a moment, but there's something to be settled first. Baker, how would you and Sue like to be married to-morrow——"

"Oh, Squire!" exclaimed the girl.

"What do you say, Baker?"

"I say 'yes'!" said the farmer earnestly.

"The sooner, the better."

"Good! Buckaloo?"

"Yes, sir, if it suits Sue."

"Now, Sue," I said. "You'll have to agree."

You and your father won't be safe anywhere but here. But it won't be proper for you to stay at Morvan unless you're married. Do you understand?"

The girl blushed and hung her head. "Yes, sir, I—I think I do." She flashed her brown eyes upon me. "But I haven't got any wedding dress, Squire."

I proved equal to the emergency. "There are half a dozen chests in the attic, I dare say, full of Mrs. Morvan's—of my mother's frocks—my grandmother's, too. You can have any one you like, Sue."

"Yes, or all of them," suggested Mr. Stockton, "all of them, Sue."

"All right, sir," agreed the girl, her eyes sparkling, "if I can find one to fit me."

"Henry, you ought to have been one of us," declared the lawyer. "That thought of yours is worthy of a Chief Justice. Look how the little witch brightens up at the idea of rummaging through those old gowns. She'd marry a hunchback this minute, on those terms."

Buckaloo's back was dressed by Joshua and Betsey, and he was put to bed, declaring he would be

all right in the morning. Sue was provided with quarters near her father's.

The boy, Sam, having proven his capacity, was formally constituted a member of the garrison, and assigned a cot in the back hall.

During the making of all these arrangements Bram preserved a neutral attitude. He was present—that is as much as can be asserted. His eyes, unusually sombre, followed every speaker, and he listened with seriousness to what was said, but he made no comments of his own. I knew he must feel his position—thrust aside from the authority that he himself had lately possessed.

As we were about to disperse for the night, Sam approached me.

“Look a here, Mastah Henry. Ho, ho! funniest picture Ah ever seen. Looks like a mewel, with an ole screech-owl a-ridin’ ’im. Foun’ it on the po’ch when we come in.”

I snatched the paper from his hand. It was another warning from Pine Owl—as it proved, the last I was destined to receive.

“Squier Hen Morvin weave played hell with Tim buckaloo and you no why we wont let a man sell his dawter to his landlord we doant cair who he is weave put hikryile on the

man who sold the gal and weal do the same and more for the man who bowt her thats you now we woant let you off eesy like we done him this is your last chanst you get out of this hear cownty or the fockses will pick your bones.

“Pine Owl.”

I passed the precious document to Mr. Stockton.

“Humph!” he said, when he had read and re-read it. “Pine Owl is a wonderfully consistent misspeller. Ever notice that? What! That’s it. Misspells with wonderful consistency, Henry.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” I agreed.

“By Gad! yes,” chimed in Bram. “The fellow can’t spell, that’s certain. But that’s what you’d expect, d’ye see?”

Doors were locked and double-locked. Shutters were closed and night-bolts shot. When I had shut myself into my own room, I went to a secret drawer and took out a little riding-whip. It was frayed almost to the whalebone, and the lash had long gone. I had brought it with me from the fencing-match in the brick-paved courtyard—taken it, perhaps, in exchange for the pair of gauntlets.

As I handled it, my thoughts went back to Pine Owl’s proclamation—not only the one I had just received—I wondered if I owed that attention to

Bram or to Joshua—but I thought, too, of the similar placard I had seen in Ferriss' belt, the day she had warned me at Pole Tavern.

Was it possible that the little hand that had carried this pitiful whip could condescend to draw pictures of skeleton owls? Could the girl who had upbraided me so proudly stoop to dictate the threats of a band of grimy ruffians?

XIV

A BRIDESMAID

By the time I arose the next morning I had reached the conclusion that the Lady of the Spur did not deserve the kind note I had commissioned Sam to carry her. It was surely too great magnanimity for any man to show—to send a friendly warning to a girl who had so flouted him.

I went toward the servants' quarters, calling loudly for Sam. The boy appeared immediately, note in hand.

"Here Ah am, Mastah Henry. Ah didn't reckon you'd been up so soon, or Ah'd come to you befo'. Here's the lettah, sah."

"That's what I want. Let me have it back. You needn't take it, after all."

"Sah?"

"I say, you needn't go over to Mr. Dayton's to-day. I've decided I won't send the note."

"Why, Mastah Henry, Ah been a'ready—been theyah and back agin. This here's the answer, sah."

"What?"

“Yas, sah; yas, sah. You tole me to go early, and Ah done it. Ah was ovah theyah plumb by sun-up and been back half an hour. Miss Ferriss she wrote this answer.”

“Did you see her? She must have been stirring early.”

“Yas, sah, she was so. She was sendin’ Jerry off somers with a lettah—tha’s what she was doin’—she was sendin’ him off jes’ when I got theyah with *your* lettah.”

I repressed a desire to ask him if he knew whither Jerry had been bound. The boy ran on.

“Yas, sah, Ah give her the lettah, but Ah didn’t have to wait a week for no answer. Dad blim it, no! She grab the papeh right out’n my hand, and lickety-split into the house with it. Wasn’t more’n two minits fo’ she was out agin, her eyes jest a-shinin’, I tell yo’, Mastah Henry.” He looked at me slyly. “They’s somebody theyah mighty glad, or mighty mad, sah—blim if Ah could tell which ’twas!”

“Never mind,” I said. “Go on.”

“Yas, sah. She tole me to give yo’ the answer. ‘And ast Mr. Morvan,’ she says, ‘ast ’im to retu’n mah whip, when he’s quite th’ough with it.’ Yas,

sah, tha's jest what she tole me to tell yo'—' when he's quite th'ough with it,' she says."

"Was that all?" I demanded.

"She tried to give me a pair o' gloves, too—said they was yourn. But yo' hadn't said nothin' 'bout 'em, so Ah wouldn't take 'em." The darkey grinned his tremendous grin. "She stamped her foot, and says I jest got to take 'em. But I up and says, 'No ma'am, Mastah Henry hadn't said nothin' 'bout takin' no gloves!' and I tole her I didn't dast do it."

"Sam, you're a treasure. What did Miss Ferriss have to say about the Pine Owls beating Buckaloo?"

"Don't guess she knowed nothin' 'bout 'em. Ah didn't tell her, and Ah don't guess she'd heard nothin' 'bout it yet. Ah ain't even tole Jerry, sah."

"Sam, you're a hero. You'll find a good pair of boots in my closet. You can have them—and here's a shilling for you."

I opened Ferriss' letter eagerly. I had not expected so prompt an answer. Indeed, I had thought it likely that Sam might really have waited a week in vain. It was addressed simply:

“Henry Morvan, Esquire:

“Mr. Morvan’s warning will be treated with the contempt it deserves. Possibly he is not aware that Mary Pedersen was Mr. Dayton’s trusted housekeeper in happier years. He may learn, also, that she was once Mr. Bramfield Morvan’s nurse. Mr. Henry Morvan’s attempt to poison Miss Dayton’s mind against a faithful servant is quite in vain.

“The word of a man who could come straight from a shameless brawl over a peasant girl, to profess friendship for a gentlewoman is beneath scorn. Miss Dayton had supposed the bruise on Mr. Morvan’s cheek to be a token of his poor horsemanship; she has since learned that it came from his rival’s fist.”

“Ferris Dayton.”

It was bad enough, this scornful letter, but it might easily have been worse. My fair “cousin” plainly supposed I had mauled Arnold for the sake of Sue Buckaloo’s saucy lips. So I had, in a way, but not the way she imagined—I had not fought on my own account. My Lady of the Spur resented my struggle for the favors of the charcoal-burner’s daughter—I put the note in my pocket with distinct satisfaction.

At breakfast Mr. Stockton and I arranged the details of the wedding, Bram joining in our discussion with a greater show of good-nature than I

had expected of him. From Betsey we learned that the bride-to-be had already been an hour engrossed in the contents of the ancestral clothes-presses.

"What did I tell you?" chuckled the lawyer. "It's the wedding gown a woman cares about at first. She usually learns to love her husband afterward, I grant you, but it's the gown that leads her to take the fatal step."

I went upstairs to see Buckaloo. He was limping about his room, swearing mildly now and then, but on the whole not badly off.

"How goes it, Buckaloo?"

"Better, Squire, better. My feet give me a stab but I'll see my little gel through the marryin' all right."

"I'll tell you our plan," I said. "Ned and Sam will drive you down to the church in the coach, along with Sue and Baker. We'll get there late, and we can slip into a back pew, so that you'll hardly have to walk ten yards. When the time comes Mr. Stockton can go up the aisle and give Sue away."

Matters were arranged as I suggested. The coach with the wedding party—Mr. Stockton,

Bram, and I as outriders—arrived in good style at the church. In order to escape the notice of the loungers about Bat Merry's Tavern, we had taken the precaution to drive around the village and come in from the lower end. Thus the first building we reached was Saint Peter's itself.

I helped Sue from the coach. She was entirely subdued by this time, and demure enough to satisfy the most exacting. Although she had had the choice of many a flounced and brocaded gown, a natural good taste had led her to select one of India muslin. In it her brown beauty showed to advantage. She had found some white silk stockings, and a pair of some long-dead Morvan girl's dancing pumps to complete her costume. She wore no veil—such was not then the fashion for girls of her station.

The Sunday morning service was already near its end, and in the dimly-lighted church, our party managed to take possession of a back pew without attracting much attention. Half a dozen heads were turned our way, but probably few people recognized us.

Although the news of Buckaloo's maltreatment at the hands of the Pine Owls had already spread

like wildfire through the county, yet it was to be doubted that any of the usual church-goers knew the humble piner, even by sight. And eyes that might have been directed curiously on the Squire of Morvan, or on the pretty brown-skinned girl by his side, were bent upon prayer-books—to their credit be it said.

So Buckaloo, Mr. Stockton, Baker, and Sue filed into the pew, with me on the outside. Sam went to his place in the gallery. Bram, too, declaring he could see the girls better, sought a seat above, and presently I saw him peering down, as if endeavoring to discover the prettiest faces.

I stared about the church in my turn. Doctor Garrett was reading the closing prayers in his mellow voice. With his white gown and silvery hair he looked like the figure of Saint Peter in the stained glass behind the lectern. A saintly old man, the words of the Common Prayer sounded more than ever solemn from his lips.

I looked at Sue. Her head was bowed, and she was wiping her eyes from time to time. Baker, his honest face shining, held one of her hands in his.

Glancing up at the gallery, I saw Bram suddenly start and lean forward.

Two girls walked lightly up the aisle, and stole into the pew in front of where we sat. The first girl may have been charming enough, but I hardly saw her—my glance was held by the taller of the two.

She wore a simple frock of pink-and-white mulle, wonderfully fresh and dainty. A Leghorn hat crowned her hair. I noticed her graceful length of limb, and her ear, set close against her shapely head. I had never seen her in aught but a threadbare riding-habit, but I knew her at once. Doubtless this was "the one other gown in the world."

She slipped into the pew, as one accustomed to the place, and sank on her knees.

I gazed at her rather malignantly. It was to be hoped she would have the grace to pray for deliverance from the sin of uncharitableness. Possibly, also, she would here be able to remember that evil communications corrupt good manners!

Above her Bram and behind her I stared consumedly. Bram had the better of it, for he could see her forehead, and, perhaps, when she should rise, even her whole face. However, I might be able to snatch a glimpse of her profile.

But she did not rise. On the contrary, she re-

mained kneeling with bowed head to the very end of the service.

Mr. Stockton leaned past Baker and Sue to whisper to me. "Do you see Miss Dayton? Looks different on Sunday, doesn't she? She comes here regularly. Pillar of the church—what?"

I had been watching Ferriss, bitterness in my heart, yet I did not like the lawyer's fling. I pretended not to hear, and he subsided.

Bram continued to gaze down with all his soul. The light came in the mullioned window behind him. I studied his bluff features and the outline of his close-cropped head. He looked a manly country gentleman enough, yet I believed him a subtle scoundrel. His lips moved—I could imagine his muttered: "By Gads!" over the beauty of our cousin Ferriss. I wondered uneasily if he had ever seen her in the pink-and-white mulle before this morning. ♣

Baker and Sue were looking shyly at each other, and Buckaloo was well-nigh asleep in his corner.

My eyes and thoughts returned to Ferriss. Was it the thought of her meagre wardrobe, or the droop of her little head that made a lump come into my throat? For a while, at least, I forgot Sue

Buckaloo and her wedding—I forgot Henry Morvan dead of fever in the grass of the Missouri, and Tom Bell masquerading in his place—I dreamed of My Lady of the Spur.

I came to myself with a start. The service was almost ended. Dr. Garrett was making an announcement.

“I have received a request this morning to unite in the bonds of Holy Matrimony two members of this parish.” He paused and looked benevolently toward the back pew, whereat there was a general turning of heads in our direction. “Will these persons please come forward at the conclusion of the last hymn?”

As the hymn began Ferriss turned her head sharply, looked from me to pretty Sue and back again with widening eyes, then rose from her seat, as if to hurry out. It was then I conceived my magnificent revenge.

On the instant I gained the end of her pew, and bent over her. She sank into her seat, gazing up at me, her face pale, her lips half-parted. Under cover of the singing, I spoke rapidly.

“Cousin Ferriss, my tenants—my *tenants* are to be married. I want you to help us.”

"I?" she breathed.

"Yes. I stand up with the groom, but the girl is alone. Her father, Tim Buckaloo, was badly beaten last night by ruffians from the swamp—as you know."

"What!" Only the hearty chanting of the people about us prevented the cry from ringing through the church. As it was, one or two of the nearest worshippers regarded us with curiosity.

I continued. "Yes. He's able to be here, but he can't walk up to give his daughter away. Mr. Stockton will do that, but Sue is left without a woman friend."

"Sue Buckaloo?" she said faintly.

"Sue Buckaloo," I repeated, and held her eyes with mine. "She's to marry Baker—one of my farmers. They've been betrothed more than a year."

Tears sprang to the eyes that looked up at me. "Oh! I—I didn't know."

"You'll be her bridesmaid? It's hard for a girl to be alone at a time like this."

Her gray eyes smiled a little mistily. "I'll do anything I can."

"Come then—they'll be through this hymn in a moment."

We hurried to our little party. Ferriss took Sue's hand and looked into her face—then kissed her sweetly.

“Do you love him very much?” she whispered.

“Oh, yes, Miss,” said the trembling Sue. “He's a good man.”

Ferriss gave the bride's gown a few tugs and pats—the hymn came to an end—our wedding party swept up the aisle. The church fairly rose at us. And, indeed, in spite of our hurried preparations, we made a very gallant show.

Mr. Stockton, in his best drabs and gaiters, bore the blushing Sue on his arm. She wore the India muslin with the air of one born to it—as pretty a bride as you could have found in both Jerseys. Then came my “cousin” Ferriss—to my eye seeming to float rather than to walk up the aisle. Behind her followed Baker and myself, the farmer's broad shoulders fitting snugly in his best bottle-green coat.

As we advanced, a murmur, not to be repressed, went through the church. I knew it was not caused by the beauty of the bride, nor even by the scandalous rumors her marriage was about to put at rest forever—it was produced by the presence of a

Dayton in the same bridal party with the Squire of Morvan. The feud of the two branches of the family was older than many of the spectators present. Small wonder they were amazed!

There was still a good old custom in our part of the Jerseys—a custom dating from the time of the royal patentees—whereby the station of each member of a wedding party was published to all it might concern. Dr. Garrett proceeded to make this announcement.

“The persons here before me to be united in Holy Matrimony are Susan Buckaloo, spinster, only daughter of Timothy Buckaloo, and Lemuel Baker, bachelor, both tenants of the Manor of Morvan. Thomas Stockton, Esquire, of this township and parish, gives the bride into the keeping of her husband—the bride’s father, through the malice of man, being unable to perform that duty.” There was a great craning of necks toward the back of the church, where old Buckaloo was leaning on a stick, and gazing admiringly up the aisle. The rector went on.

“For sponsor to this woman stands Miss Ferriss Dayton, and for sponsor to this man Henry Morvan, Esquire, both of Morvan Manor.”

In his benevolent absorption the old doctor had forgotten that Ferriss was not "of Morvan Manor." She flushed, and glanced at me sidelong, but I pretended not to have observed the rector's slip.

Then the touching words were said that made Baker and his pretty Sue man and wife.

Mr. Stockton gave the bride away with a paternal pride that would have made me smile upon another occasion. As it was, I was nearer the other thing, for both Sue and Baker said their "I will" with such gentleness and sincerity that I was glad to turn away my head lest Ferriss should see how my eyes were shining. As for her, she cried a little in sympathy with the bride, and kissed her very sweetly when the ceremony was over.

"By the Eternal!" chuckled the lawyer, as we made our way out of the church. "Did you see 'em stare? We've put a stopper on Madam Grundy's tongue, once for all. What! They'll think you and Miss Ferriss have arranged matters for yourselves, too. Trust the village gossips for that!"

This time it was I who glanced uneasily at Ferriss, and it was she who pretended not to have heard.

Before we could gain the coach we were surrounded, questioned, and congratulated, by half the people in the church. Buckaloo, Sue, and Baker, were objects of keen curiosity. Then, too, the better part of them had not before seen the new Squire of Morvan. So I found myself shaking hands with many old friends of the family.

Ferriss, perforce, came in for a full share of all this friendly greeting. From the number of people who introduced themselves to her, I understood that she had long been in the habit of coming to church late, speaking to no one, and slipping away before the service was over.

Very soon a little gray-haired gentleman I well remembered, pushed his way up to us.

“Good-morning, Mr. Morvan. Good-morning, sir.”

“Mr. Hancock! I’m happy to see you again, sir.”

“Thank you, thank you! You know, Stockton, I gave Mr. Morvan—Henry, may I say?—I gave Henry his first welcome home.”

“You did, indeed, sir. Your memory for faces is really wonderful.”

“I’ll outlast some of you young men yet. But I want to speak to Miss Dayton here.” He pinched

her arm knowingly as he spoke. "I'm William Hancock, my dear. I used to know your father when—ah—when his health permitted him to go out. A pretty wedding, wasn't it?" He looked from me to her. "I dare say you'll be having a wedding of your own before long, my dear."

The girl's eyebrows settled in a straight line, but she made no answer.

We handed the bride and groom into their coach at last. Buckaloo was helped in. Sam mounted the box beside Ned, and the horses moved away at a walk. Bram was nowhere to be seen.

Mr. Stockton took me aside. "Henry," he said, "I think those rascals of Pine Owls will leave you alone for a while. That sort always moves by fits and starts. They've flogged Buckaloo—that'll satisfy them for a few days. I'm going up to Trenton to take some precautions. What! Precautions—that's the word."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Oh, business—business precautions. Official, if you like. Yes, official precautions. Let me see—Trenton? The roads are fair at this time of year—three days' posting will do it. I'll be back in three days, Henry. I'll leave Dick with you."

“Very well, sir.”

Ferriss extricated herself from her circle of new acquaintances, and came up to me.

“Can I help you mount?” I asked. “Where is Grayboy?”

“I left him in the rectory stables. No—I want to say—to tell you——” She hung her head. “Cousin,” she went on bravely, “when I wrote you that postscript this morning, I—I didn’t know.” Her eyes widened. “No. And I didn’t know they meant to beat Buckaloo.”

“You thought they meant to beat *me*?” I said with sarcasm.

“You know I didn’t. I knew nothing about it—nothing. You believe me, don’t you? I didn’t dream they would dare. You must believe me—you must!”

“I do,” I said involuntarily.

She gave me a sudden smile, and walked quickly toward the rectory.

XV

SCARLET

I OVERTOOK the coach half-way up the village street. That rascal, Sam, had produced a quantity of white ribbon from some hiding-place—a formidable streamer decorated each wheel, and several yards more flaunted from his hat, and from Ned's whip. I was well pleased at the sight.

"Let yourselves out, boys," I cried. "Whip up your horses, Ned! Make all the noise you like."

Setting the example—Sunday, though it was—I gave a view-halloo worthy of Bram himself, and put spurs to my roan.

The darkies needed no second bidding. Ned lashed his team into a run, and with both boys emitting excited yells, and Sue—half laughing, half alarmed—leaning from the window, we whirled up the street, past the loungers at Merry's Tavern, in a way to make the eyes of those worthies start from their heads. A half dozen men ran out from the bar-room as we galloped by.

"Drive on, Ned!" I shouted. "Tell Joshua to see that Mr. and Mrs. Baker have the best of

everything at home." I bent down to the coach-window. "Sue, I'm going back to Merry's, to have them drink the health of Mrs. Baker." She nodded, laughing, and blushing.

I wheeled, and cantered up to the tavern. A lively interest in my approach was easily perceptible. I dismounted, and gave my horse to a stable-boy.

"Good-day, gentlemen," I called. "I want you all to drink a health." I entered the bar-room, followed by the greater part of the loungers. "Merry, I want all hands to drink to the health of her who was Sue Buckaloo—she's just been married to Lem Baker. Long life and happiness to Mr. and Mrs. Baker, gentlemen!"

The landlord, a small, pale-faced man, bustled smartly about.

"Welcome, welcome, Squire," he said. "I was hopin' you'd drop in some day soon. Yes, sir—we heard a few minutes ago there was a weddin' goin' on. Drink the bride and groom's health? Cert'ny, cert'ny. Shall it be applejack, or metheglin, or the real Jamaica, sir?"

"Give everyone his choice."

"That's kind of you, Squire—cert'ny." He

poured the liquor into the ready glasses of the assemblage. "An honest man Baker is, and a first-rate farmer, they say. A pretty girl he's got."

"A *good* girl, too, Merry."

"I believe you, Squire. For my part, I'm glad to hear she's married. Some of the boys was a-sayin' the other day they thought *you* might be a little sweet in that direction. But it's all right now, o' course."

A covert smile went round at the innkeeper's thrust. I put down my tumbler.

"Who said that?" I demanded.

The man paled a little. "Oh, I don't just remember who. The boys was on'y jokin', I guess."

I glared about the suddenly-abashed group of men. My glance fell upon "Brownie" Davis. His weazened face and peaked head gave me a start. I fixed him with my eye.

"Gentlemen," I said, pounding the bar with my fist, "I don't like such jokes. I haven't been down this way since I was a mighty small boy, but it used to be, in the Jerseys, that when a man said a thing like that he'd back it up—if not, he was a liar and a coward." I glared at "Brownie."

"Now, I won't take back what I say—the man who said that about me is a liar and a coward—and I'm here to mill with any man the cap fits—and I'll fight prize-ring or rough-and-tumble."

There was an awkward silence. No one stirred. Then Merry gave a nervous laugh.

"You're right, Squire," he said. "I guess it wasn't nobody here anyway. Besides, if you can beat Squire Arnold as they say you can, you can beat the best of us. No, sir—nobody'll ever have anything to say, after this. The girl's married, and it's all settled." To this politic declaration there was a general murmur of assent.

"Good—we'll forget it," I said. "Gentlemen, long life and happiness to the bride and groom!"

"Bottoms up, boys!" exclaimed "Brownie" Davis, recovering his audacity.

I gave the landlord money enough for another round of drinks, and called for my horse.

Merry ran out after me. "Hold on, Squire," he called loudly. "I want to get your opinion on a piece of land. Good God!" he said, when he had led me aside. "Don't ever do that again, sir. You outfaced that whole crowd, but you oughtn't to ha' tried it—it was too risky."

“A lot of tavern loafers, Merry.”

“Yes, but didn’t you notice that fellow with the high head, kind o’ queer-shaped? The one you looked at so hard? That’s ‘Brownie’ Davis, the best rough-and-tumble in the Barrens—he’s a ‘gouger’.”

“I gave him a chance to try for my eyes, Merry.”

“Yes, sir, so you did, and I was scared to death he’d take your lie up. I don’t know why he didn’t. He’s as good as been the death of three or four men around here. You outfaced him, Squire—clean outfaced him, that’s a fact, but it would ha’ cost me my license if he’d fought you in my place.”

“Why do you let such a gang make your house a headquarters, man?”

“A tavern’s a public place, Squire. Besides, I’ve got my livin’ to earn, and it ain’t you gentlemen that comes here the most.”

“So,” I said contemptuously, “you don’t care if your patrons manhandle the tenant, provided they don’t risk your precious license by mauling the master in your house.”

The fellow started. “You mean the trouble last night! I didn’t know anything about that,

sir," he said deprecatingly. "And I wouldn't dare to say anything anyhow. If I did, I might be the next one to get skinned alive." Without pause he raised his voice to a higher key. "Well, Squire, if you think I can make a cranberry-bog out of the land, I'll buy it. Land ain't as cheap as it used to be, there's no denyin' that." Davis and two or three of his companions were passing close to us on their way to the highway. He favored me with a cool stare, which I returned with interest.

I bade the landlord good-morning. It was plain the wretched fellow aimed to keep a leg each side the fence.

Davis and his followers walked briskly up the highway a few yards behind me, but at the smithy turned off into the crossroads—considerably to my relief, for I had no yearning for their company.

There seemed to be nothing left for me to do for the rest of the day. I had told the domestics at Morvan that I would not be home for the wedding breakfast. My presence there would only embarrass the bride and groom, and restrain the merry-making of their guests—the house was to be given up all day to the happy pair and their friends.

It was Sunday, and business, therefore, was not

to be thought of. Besides, Mr. Stockton was busy with his preparations for posting to Trenton—I would be only a hindrance to him. How should I pass the day?

Drawn as by a lodestone, while I still fancied I was debating the question, I found myself riding the back-road to the farmstead of Mr. John Dayton.

I turned into the apple-orchard below the house, and leaving my roan tied to the bench, walked into the courtyard.

Jerry was sunning himself against the wall, whistling shrilly while his fingers polished a bridle buckle.

“Halloo, Jerry!” I called softly.

He dropped his work, and scrambled to his feet. “’Mawnin’, sah, good-mawnin’.” He grinned in a way that reminded me of Sam. “Yo’ is Mastah Henry Mo’van, ain’t yo’, sah?”

“Yes. Where’s your mistress, Jerry?”

“I dunno, sah. She ain’t come back from chu’ch yit. Mebbe she’s jest a-ridin’ som’ers. She’s always a-ridin’, Mastah.”

I peered into the stable. “I thought I heard a horse stamping in here. Yes, so there is. Whose bay is that?”

"Tha's Squiah Ahnold's, sah. He's in the house now, callin' on Mastah Jawn."

"Oh, he is?"

"Yas, sah. He comes here right often. I s'pect he's aftah Miss Ferriss. Ya ha!" The boy broke into his rich laughter. "He try to git Miss Ferriss by cou'tin' Mastah Jawn. That ain't no way to do. He ain't like you, Mastah Henry—yo're a-cou'tin' the right one. Ya ha!"

I thought it wise to take no notice of this observation.

"Mr. Arnold comes here often, does he?"

"Yas, sah. 'Deed, he does." The boy rolled his eyes at me as if he divined my thoughts. "Mastah Bram Mo'van used to call on Miss Ferriss, too, pretty reg'lar, but I ain't seen 'im here lately. Reckon he's a-cou'tin' somebody else, not more'n a milyun miles from here. But Squiah Ahnold! Seems like to me he comes 'most ev'ry day."

"Does your master receive him?"

"Who? Squiah Ahnold? Yas, indeedy." The lad paused and peered about as if apprehensive of being overheard. "I tell you how 'tis, Mastah Henry—looks like to me, old mastah wants Miss Ferriss to say 'yas' to Squiah Ahnold, but she won't have it no way."

I pondered this information a moment.

"Jerry," I asked, "are you the only servant about the place?"

"Yas, sah. I'm the on'y one."

"But who does the cooking, and all that?"

"Miss Ferriss she does. She does the cookin', and the sweepin', and the sewin', and everythin' else, blame nigh. 'Co'se Ah does the stable work, and the ga'den, and—and——" The boy shuffled his feet in confusion.

"Well, and what? Speak up, Jerry."

"Well, dad blim it! Ah does the washin', too. Ah couldn't let Miss Ferriss do that no way."

"Jerry, I'm proud of you," I said. "I mean to give you ten shillings a week myself. You mustn't say anything about it, mind! And I want you to look out for your mistress, night and day."

"Yas, sah. I'll do it," declared the boy earnestly. "Pshaw! I don't want yo're money. Ah won't nevah go back on Miss Ferriss nohow."

"I know you won't, but I want you to take the money. Jerry, isn't there anything I can do for her? Does she ever lack for food?"

"Oh, no, sah. They's always plenty to eat. I'm 'fraid yo' cain't buy her nothin', Mastah Henry."

She's proud as kin-be—and Mastah Jawn, he's prouder 'n forty kin-bes. Yas, sah, he is so. If they ever foun' out anythin' was a-comin' from you—Lawzee!" The boy laughed again. "Why, Mastah Henry, I've heard the ole man a-cussin' out yo' fambly from A to Izzard, straight through the hull fo'noon. I have so."

"Then you don't think anything can be done for her?"

"No, sah, I don't."

A loud call sounded from the direction of the house.

"Tha's Squiah Ahnold now," exclaimed the boy. He ran into the stable, and began hastily to untie the bay horse. "Wants his hoss. Always in a blame hurry when he does git sta'ted."

"Boy!" bellowed Arnold. "You lazy black rascal! Where's my horse?"

"Hear 'im," muttered Jerry resentfully, as he led out the animal. "Always shoots his mouf off at me like that. Blim 'is ugly hide!"

I peered out from the stable door. Arnold was at the corner of the house, fuming about. He poured a volley of curses on the young darkey as he came up. I could not hear his words distinctly, but their character was unmistakable.

Jerry seemed to be preserving a cautious, or perhaps, frightened silence, and this reserve angered Arnold still more. Doubtless he was expending on the boy the rage he had been forced to bottle up in the house.

By the time he was settled in the saddle, he had worked himself into a pretty temper.

“By God!” he roared. “Is every soul in this place trying to drive me to distraction? Damn you, Jerry! Are you grinning at me?”

The boy evidently replied in the negative, for Arnold continued furiously. “Don’t lie to me, you black scoundrel!” He struck him across the face with his whip. “Take that! It’ll wipe away your smile.” He put spurs to his nag, and galloped down the back-road at top speed.

It had all passed too quickly for me to interfere.

Jerry re-entered the stable, his face a blackish-gray with pain and rage.

“Did yo’ see that, sah?” he said thickly. “Did yo’ see how he hit me? Ah swear, if he wasn’t a white genulman, Ah’d git even with ’im, if it took to Jedgment Day. Ah’d cut ’im, suah—if he wasn’t white.”

I comforted the poor fellow as best I could. In a few minutes, he was grinning cheerfully again.

“Ah did laugh at him, tha’s the truth,” he said. “Ah seen plaster all over his face, wha’ yo’ hit him yistiddy, Mastah Henry. Ya ha! I heard about it. Dad blim it! I couldn’t he’p laughin’. If on’y Ah’d been theyah when yo’ walloped ’im, Ah’d jest nachally died—I would so.”

I lingered a long while with Jerry, in the vain hope that Ferriss would return. At last I grew impatient, and gave up the thought of seeing her that day. Besides, I had a fancy to trace Mr. Arnold’s impetuous course—some knowledge of his habits might be useful.

The tracks of his horse’s hoofs lay plain in the sandy back-road, and I mounted and followed without difficulty. At the point where the road led into the turnpike, he had branched off and taken a smaller path through the pines.

I had walked my roan for a mile or two along this path when, rounding a curve, I almost collided with a woman standing in the middle of the way. She was plainly of the humbler sort, although I was vaguely conscious of an unusual neatness of attire.

“Be careful, my good woman,” I said. “I nearly rode over you.”

She looked up at me. She was young and dis-

tingly pretty—but what particularly drew my attention were the tears still fresh on her cheeks. I peered at her more closely—the light was dim under the pines.

“What’s the matter?” I asked. “Is anything wrong?”

“His horse brushed against me, and hurt me,” she said. “He wouldn’t even stop and speak to me—though the Lord knows I don’t bother him much.” She paused abruptly and her black eyes stared at me. “Why—oh!—excuse me, sir. I thought you were Squire Morvan.”

“I am,” I returned. “I’m Henry Morvan.”

“Oh—the new squire. I took you for Mr. Bram when you spoke. Not that you look much alike, but he’s generally with Lawrence.”

She dried her tears carelessly. I wondered who she could be—an accursed curiosity got the better of me.

“You know my cousin, then?”

“Oh, yes. Bram Morvan used to come to my house with Lawrence.”

“Lawrence?”

“Lawrence Arnold. But *he* doesn’t come any more. I don’t miss him, nowadays, though—I’ve

company enough without him." She saw my look of inquiry. "I'm Letty Miller," she said.

The name meant nothing to me, and I found nothing to say. However, plainly she did not expect an answer. Her eyes traveled over me—then she smiled.

"My house is right here." She waved her hand toward a sizable cottage in the pines. "Won't you rest a while, Squire?"

"I believe I will," I responded. I dismounted and, still holding my horse's bridle, sat down on the steps of the porch. "Ought I to know your name? I've only just come to the county, you know."

Before she could reply, Ferriss Dayton rode around the turn of the path.

I sprang to my feet, and advanced toward her with lifted cap. The dark brows settled in a line above the luminous eyes. She looked straight at me, and rode by without moving a muscle of her face. She had cut me dead.

I stood too dumbfounded to speak. Then I ground my teeth—the girl's vagaries were enough to drive a man mad.

Striving to hide my discomfiture, I resumed my seat on the porch. My hostess, leaning against a

pillar, seemed completely oblivious of the whole incident.

"I'll have your horse taken, Squire," she said.

She pursed her lips—they were invitingly red and full—and whistled twice. A stout black woman appeared at the cottage door.

"There'll be a gentleman to supper, Sarah," said my hostess, "and send Billy for the horse."

"Yas'm," responded the woman, and departed.

I congratulated myself that I had not called my pretty acquaintance "Letty," as I had been about to do. Thank Heaven! I had said "my good woman" only once. What sort of pinner was this, who ruled a cottage of this size, and had at least two servants to wait upon her? I must have made a mistake in judging her position. I stole a side-long glance.

Her gown was simple enough—my masculine taste did not suffer me to understand that the material was far too rich for the time and place. The clocked stocking and silver-buckled shoe showed a well-turned ankle.

Her eyes followed my glance at her feet. She laughed and thrust one of them coquettishly forward.

“Ought I to know who Letty Miller is?” I repeated.

“Well,” she said, “may be not, you being a newcomer; but some of the gentlemen do. Oh, yes.” She smiled frankly. “My father used to be a tenant of Lawrence Arnold’s. Dad died in the poorhouse, and I——” She paused and regarded me significantly. “Well, a girl doesn’t have to go to the poorhouse—not if she’s pretty, you see!”

Yes—I saw at last. Sue Buckaloo’s passionate exclamation, the morning I had seen her rebuff Arnold, seemed to ring in my ears: “Go, ask one of your own people, who can’t help herself. You can’t turn *my* dad out to starve, like you did Letty Miller’s!” Letty Miller! and Ferriss Dayton had cut me dead.

“Here’s Billy,” said the woman, as an old darkey appeared. “Billy, take the gentleman’s horse.”

I rose hastily. “No, no! I must be going—I’ve some business to attend to.”

I left her, staring after me in a puzzled fashion. Lawrence Arnold, and “some of the gentlemen,”—perhaps my “cousin” Bram—had given her a ghastly idea of men.

And Ferriss Dayton had cut me dead!

XVI

THE LAUGHTER OF THE GODS

I HAD been so absorbed in the events of the afternoon that it was not until I rode away from Letty Miller's cottage that I noticed how late it was.

The sun had set, and the brief autumn afterglow had faded. It was quite dark by the time I had followed the bridle-path a mile or two. In my confusion, I somewhere took a wrong turn, and presently realized that I had lost my way.

This in itself was no great matter, for I was certain to run across a house, sooner or later, but in the present unsettled state of the county, I had good cause to be on the alert. I confess, the noise of a gray-squirrel crashing its homeward way through the branches of a hickory made me start and grip my cudgel. However, this was a weapon of extraordinary potency—I balanced it in my hand with satisfaction.

I had fashioned this cudgel the day before. I had drilled a hole half the length of a piece of water-soaked oak—a stick as long as my arm, and

nearly as thick as my two thumbs. Into this hole I had poured melted lead, and afterward capped the stick with rings of the same metal. As a result, I was provided with what, at a little distance, might pass for a heavy riding-whip, but what was in reality a formidable bludgeon—a weapon to be compared to the mace of a Richard Lion Heart. Its weight, dangling from the thong about my wrist, was very reassuring.

I pushed along the unknown path as briskly as the darkness would allow. In half an hour or so, I was relieved to come out on the turnpike, although at a point that was strange to me.

As I hesitated I espied the lights of a house on a little eminence. Setting my course toward this, I soon passed through a handsome gateway and, at the end of an avenue, found myself before a stately mansion. It might have stood for a counterpart of Morvan—a large brick-made house, built in the days of Lord Berkeley.

Hardly had my horse's hoofs sounded on the gravelled road-bed, when the door was flung open and, with the flood of light, a charming girl rushed out.

“Oh, Bram!” she cried. “Is that you at last?”

I thought you were never coming! All the servants are off to a husking—and I'm all alone."

I bowed to my saddlebow. "Madam, for the second time within an hour a pretty woman has taken me for my cousin. The first time I regretted it—now, upon my soul! I wish I were he."

She recoiled, and the light from the open door illumined my face. "Oh! you aren't Bram?"

"I'm his cousin, Henry Morvan."

"Mr. Henry Morvan?" Her tone was not flattering.

"Yes. I've lost my way. Will you honor me with your name?"

"I am Katharine Arnold," she answered very stiffly. "Mr. Lawrence Arnold's sister—and this is Fairview."

Here was a pretty kettle of fish. "I didn't know," I said. "I'm almost a stranger in the county, of course. I lost my way, and stumbled on you entirely by accident. If you'll be good enough to direct me toward Morvan, I need not trouble you longer."

The girl seemed a little taken aback by my professed willingness to withdraw. She bit her lip, and gazed up at me uncertainly. She was very

small—far too much so for my taste—but exceedingly pretty. Her blue eyes, fair hair, and oval face made a charming picture against the light.

“I don’t mean to be inhospitable,” she said hurriedly, “but only yesterday you attacked my brother, and I can’t pretend——”

“It was a fair fight,” I interrupted.

“My brother is said to be the best boxer in the county,” she retorted. “If it had been a fair fight——”

Again I broke in. “You seem to know Bram well. When you next see him, get him to tell you about the mill—he was present. And if you like, get him to explain *why* I fought your brother.”

“Lawrence has told me that himself,” she cried. “You were angry because—because he wouldn’t let you treat one of your tenants as you wished.”

I laughed shortly. “Ask Bram to explain to you about that, too. In the meanwhile, I have the pleasure to inform you that the girl was married to one of my farmers, at noon to-day.”

The blood rushed to her cheeks. “I know it, sir—I saw the wedding.” She hesitated, blushing without any apparent reason. “I was with Miss Ferriss Dayton.”

"You are a friend of hers, then?" I asked eagerly.

"We are dear friends." She frowned. "But I am detaining you, sir."

"I am most happy."

"I'm sorry I cannot say as much, Mr. Morvan. The marriage of your tenant doesn't do away with the fact that you beat my brother on her account."

"Ask Bram," I repeated. "If he tells you the truth——"

"He always tells me the truth," she flashed.

"All the better. Miss Arnold, which is the shortest road to Morvan, if you please?"

My touch of temper served to dampen her own.

"Follow the turnpike," she answered less haughtily. "Do you see that cottage light down there?"

"Yes."

"A mile beyond that, a crossway will lead you to the postroad. Is there anything else?"

"Thank you, no. I know my way after I reach the postroad." I gave her a formal bow. "Kindly submit my apologies to Mr. Arnold for my intrusion, and accept them yourself. Good-night, madam."

She regarded me ruefully. Her loneliness made her appreciate the company even of an enemy, yet she could not well detain me.

“Good-night, sir.”

“Always a sister, or wife, or sweetheart to defend a man,” I reflected as I rode away, “no matter what a brute he may be. Someone for every man but me apparently. That little witch seems to be on good terms with Bram, too. Strange he never mentions her.”

I suddenly remembered Bram’s toast as he had begun it in Mary Pedersen’s cabin: “Here’s to the Flower of Fairview.” The old beldame had taken it to be a toast to Ferriss Dayton, but Bram had turned it off to Sue Buckaloo, and had made a great show of interest in the piner’s daughter. Perhaps, after all, he had really meant it to be in praise of the Flower of Fairview, Katharine Arnold.

“I wonder if she ever heard him roar, ‘A girl, a bottle, and a gun’,” I mused. “She might change her mind about Cousin Bramfield.”

The idea so tickled me that, when I had found the crossway beyond the cottage and was jogging comfortably along it, I began to sing lustily.

“A girl, a bottle, and a gun,
To make the seasons flit—
And of the three, when all is done,
A girl’s the best of it.”

I lifted my face toward the rising moon, and
roared in Bram’s most jovial manner.

“A faithful hound, a gallant horse
That strains against the bit—
A girl—”

“Good Lord, Squire,” said a voice at my horse’s
nose, “we hope one of you gits the gel—but don’t
wake the dead to tell ’em about it, so to speak.”

My startled glance fell upon a group of men
moving along the road. Wrapped up in my emu-
lation of Bram, I had ridden into their midst una-
wares. Six or seven men on foot trudged beside a
single horseman.

As I looked, an awful thrill went through me—
the men were without heads! And then I realized
the truth—every man’s head was covered by a black
bag. It was Pine Owl and his men!

At the same moment, they, too, perceived their
mistake. A fierce yell went up.

“It’s the other! The new squire! It’s him!”
They rushed upon me from all sides.

I whirled up my formidable bludgeon. "Keep off, you scoundrels!" I shouted. "I'll kill the first man that touches me."

They hung back a little, and I spurred desperately forward. The horseman now seemed to recognize me for the first time. With a peculiar sharp cry he wheeled his mount in front of me. Leaning forward, he snatched a pistol from his holster and presented it at my breast. My descending bludgeon dashed the weapon from his hand and fell unchecked full between the eyes of his luckless beast. Man and horse went down as if struck by lightning. I spurred headlong over them, and striking right and left, won clear in an instant.

I was forty yards away and going like the wind before the ruffians dreamed of pursuit. Even then, as their diminishing shouts speedily showed, they realized that for footmen to pursue a mounted man was sheer folly.

In three minutes I galloped out on the turnpike. In the *melée* I had become turned about and was retracing my path. But I was by no means disturbed—I counted myself born under a lucky star to be alive at that moment. My roan dropped to a walk. I looked up at the moon and felt a lively

sense of astonishment that it should still be shining.

Convinced not only that I was unhurt, but that the world still wagged as usual, I resolved to satisfy myself of Pine Owl's identity. I had had only a glimpse of the black-bagged head, shapeless and terrible, but the body I had seen as it fell. The man was too slender for my "cousin" Bram—besides one of the footpads had taken me for him. He sat his saddle too skilfully for "Brownie" Davis. It must be Lawrence Arnold.

A ready way to make certain was to keep watch on Fairview until its owner should return. Although my blow had not touched Pine Owl at all, yet his fall must have shaken him severely. I reasoned that he would make for his home and a chance to recover from the shock.

Fairview was surrounded by a grove of oaks, and all along one side of the house the scrub oak and undergrowth grew close to the wall—a perfect hiding-place.

I tied the roan well back in the trees, out of sight of the avenue. Then I burrowed out a place in the thicket, and disposed myself for my watch. Without being compelled to do more than raise my head, I could see the approach up the avenue, and the path that wound to the side-door.

So sure was I of my man that I had supposed my vigil would not be a long one; but the hours went by and there was no sign of Lawrence Arnold.

Half a dozen black servants straggled in, laughing and talking after the manner of their race. The lights in the house went out until only one remained—still I did not see the bulky shoulders or hear the heavy tread I had expected.

Fairview was wrapped in darkness, save for the light that burned steadily in the upper window. Two or three times I saw a woman's figure pass across the curtain. Miss Katharine Arnold was making her leisurely preparations for the night. I wondered if she would ask Bram, when next she should see him, the real reason for my quarrel with her brother.

It must have been near midnight, and Arnold had not appeared. Was I mistaken, after all? Or had Pine Owl been too badly injured to be readily moved? Perhaps his fellows had taken him to the cabin in Lost Hollow—yet it was an impossible distance, if he were really much hurt. Could he have gone to Letty Miller's cottage? Not long since he would have found warm welcome there.

An owl hooted weirdly from the thicket nearby.

I settled doggedly into my cloak. I would see this thing through, if I waited until dawn.

At last even the light in Miss Arnold's room was extinguished. The owl still hooted persistently not a rod from me. I felt about for a stone to silence him, but could not lay hold of any.

The light above suddenly gleamed out again—and was again extinguished. Twice was this manœuvre repeated. The owl hooted again. My heart began to beat heavily.

Then a man stepped from the thicket, a ladder in his hand. He stole swiftly across the open space and the moonlight fell upon his face. It was Bram Morvan.

He planted the ladder in the shadow of the wall, and mounted without an instant's pause. The window opened softly to receive him.

I stumbled to my horse, and galloped fiercely homeward. If I encountered Pine Owl and his men again, so much the worse for them—I would have relished fighting my way madly through them.

Bram Morvan the betrayer of his friend's sister! I was sick to the very soul, but—what a judgment on Lawrence Arnold! The laughter of the gods for the soul of Letty Miller!

XVII

BY THE LAKE

THE night passed quietly. Whatever mischief Pine Owl and his night-brawlers had been bent upon had probably been abandoned after their encounter with me. My bludgeon had shattered their enterprise for that night, at least. But the thought of what I had seen at Fairview made the world taste bitter the next morning. I fear I received Sam's cheerful grin rather sourly.

"What's the news, Sam?" I demanded.

"Purty considabul, Mastah Henry. Betsey she had a scrumpshus dinnah fo' the bride and groom yistiddy. Must ha' been fo'ty-fifty folks here, Ah guess. O' co'se, me and Dick kep' watch las' night. Yas, and ole man Buck'loo, too."

"Has he recovered?"

"Purty near. Swears quite some few yit—but he's all right."

"Where's Mr. Bram?"

"Jest come ridin' in a few minnits ago. He's been up early—or mebbe out mighty late. Ah ha!"

“That will do, Sam. You may go.”

I ate a solitary breakfast. Afterward letters claimed my attention. Amongst others I found a note from Mr. Stockton—sent by a messenger the afternoon before—saying that he was on the point of starting for Trenton, and that he would tell me an interesting bit of gossip when he saw me again. I wondered if Bram, or Lawrence Arnold, had been engaged in some additional iniquity.

I decided not to mention my encounter with Pine Owl to anyone at Morvan. The story of my danger, coming after the attack on Buckaloo, would only increase the terror of the domestics, and could lead to no good result. In addition, it might detract from the happiness of Baker’s honeymoon.

I had come to this decision, when Baker himself entered the library.

“Do you want me for anything to-day, Squire?” His tanned face was shining, and there was no need to ask after his happiness.

“Yes, Baker,” I said. “I want you to give my best wishes to your wife, and accept them for yourself. And I don’t want to see either of you for a week—although I think you’d better sleep here at night, for your own protection.”

“Thank you, sir. Then Sue and me—we was thinkin’ we might go down and fix up our house to-day.”

“Good. If you want any of the servants to help you, take them along.”

“All right, sir. But I guess we’d kind of like to be by ourselves to-day.”

“Go, quick,” I rejoined, “or Sue will be wondering if you’ve forgotten her.”

After Baker had gone, I wandered moodily about the manor. I was involved in a web of villainy in which I was able to discover neither reason nor outcome. I did not permit myself to consider that I was spinning a neat web of my own!

One of my dependants had been badly beaten as an earnest of what I might expect for myself. I had seen the sharer of my roof-tree playing the part of a dastard toward the sister of his best friend. To crown all, My Lady of the Spur had judged me by the fair but frail company she had found me in—how her eyes had looked me through! These were thoughts to make a man down-hearted.

Thinking I might be diverted by the sight of some ducks, I slipped into the woods and worked my way down to the little lake. On this forest

side it was bordered by a dense growth of laurel to the water's edge. Forcing the bushes apart, I came abruptly upon a man.

He sat with his back toward me, gazing across the pool. Beyond, steel-blue in the Indian Summer haze, Morvan manorhouse crowned the upland slope.

Although I had made a deal of noise in my passage through the laurel, he seemed quite oblivious of my approach. I trod as heavily as possible as I drew nearer. Still he did not turn his head. His back was against a tree, yet he was not sleeping, for from time to time he beat a cane against the ground with an irritable movement.

"Good-morning," I said, and walked forward in front of his eyes.

He gave a great start, and faced me. I saw with astonishment that it was John Dayton. He sat straight and stiff, and his eyes—very keen—met my curious glance. What could the old fellow be doing, and how did he get here, of all places?"

"Good-morning," I repeated loudly. "Do you remember me, sir?"

He had recovered from the surprise his deafness had brought upon him. He surveyed me fixedly.

“Certainly,” he answered. “Certainly I remember you well, sir. You are Mr. Irving, who called on my daughter—a day or two since. Or was it a week? Time goes fast, very fast, to an old man, Mr. Irving.”

From what I had learned both from Bram and Ferriss, there would be an unpleasant scene if my “cousin” John were made to understand that I was—or was supposed to be—one of the hated Morvans. Since he persisted in taking me for a Mr. Irving, it was not worth while to undeceive him. At present, he seemed in a good humor, with something of the garrulousness of old age.

“Have you walked all this distance from your home?” I asked.

“Sir?”

“Are you out for a walk?”

“Out for a walk, are you? I suppose you’ve come to have a look at this Manor of Morvan. One of the loveliest places in West Jersey, sir. Yes, a walk is good for youth or age—youth or age. You live in the county, I believe you said, Mr. Irving.”

“Yes, but I am only lately come.”

“Sir?”

“I am a newcomer.”

“Oh, no. I come here quite often—to look at Morvan, beautiful Morvan!” He repeated the words with indescribable bitterness.

“I noticed you were studying it closely,” I said.

Either I had spoken with unusual force, or else his senses were more keen where his feelings were involved, for he beat the ground savagely with his cane.

“Yes, yes. I study Morvan closely, because Morvan is rightfully mine—mine, sir.” His eyebrows frowning up at me, reminded me grotesquely of Ferriss. “You will hear the story in the county, sir—perhaps have already done so.”

I nodded.

“Then, sir, you know my claims. They’re just—just, by Heaven! And I’ll have my rights yet.” He shook his cane at me. “I’m not too old to see the day. No, no, Mr. Irving, I’m not too old.”

Had I really been a Morvan, all this would have been mightily unpleasant for me. The fact that, by the disguise of a name to which I had no claim, I was keeping the old gentleman from his heritage, was even more distasteful. However I kept a discreet silence.

He gave a grim laugh. “Perhaps you don’t

agree with me, sir. The dreams of an old man, Mr. Irving—an old and broken man.”

As if willing to change the subject, he pointed to a pair of wood-ducks that had paddled out from the reeds and were beginning to smoothe their feathers.

“See those ducks? There’s nothing more toothsome, properly stuffed with wild celery and chestnuts. Now, if you had a fowling-piece—or even a good pistol, eh?”

“I have a pair of pistols——”

“Oh, at home, of course.”

“No, with me,” I answered, “but I think——”

“Eh? Oh, toys! It will take more than toys to bring down those wood-ducks.”

“These are first-rate dueling-pistols,” I explained, “but I think I won’t fire on the ducks. The noise might alarm the neighborhood.” I was careful to speak in a high key, and he followed my words with the most earnest attention.

“You go armed, Mr. Irving?” There was a certain uneasiness in his tone. I remembered Bram had not given him a character for courage. “You go heavily armed, sir?”

“Yes, since the recent outrage here.”

“Sir?”

"A man was beaten by outlaws close by here," I shouted. "Haven't you heard?"

"Yes, yes, of course. Mr. Lawrence Arnold was telling me of it yesterday—a disgraceful piece of business. Mr. Arnold was saying that although he dislikes Mr. Henry Morvan personally, such an act is shameful. I also have reason to dislike the name of Morvan, but I abhor violence, sir—abhor violence. So you think it advisable to go armed, Mr. Irving—even though you are only a peaceable citizen like myself—yes, yes, like myself?"

"I happened to pick up some pistols of Mr. Stockton's to-day."

"Sir?"

"The pistols I'm carrying are Mr. Thomas Stockton's."

"God bless me! You don't say so? If Mr. Stockton believes it's time to be carrying pistols, I shall have to find a pair for myself. The county must be in a very dangerous condition, indeed, sir—a disgraceful condition, I should say."

"I fancy no one would attack you," I returned.

"You mean I'm too old. Yes, it's true—true, Mr. Irving—and too poor, too. I have confidence in your discretion, sir—I am too poor to tempt footpads, I confess. But," he beat the ground with

his stick. "I have a daughter—a daughter to look after."

"Then why the devil don't you do it," I muttered, "instead of letting her gallop all over the county?"

"Sir? The devil what, sir?"

"The devil seems to be loose in the county."

"Ha! Very good. The devil in the shape of a charcoal owl on a charcoal horse—eh, Mr. Irving?"

"Have you seen one of Pine Owl's proclamations?" I cried.

"I? Heaven forbid! Mr. Arnold was telling me about one Mr. Henry Morvan received."

"Where did Mr. Arnold see it?"

"Mr. Arnold? No, I believe Mr. Bramfield Morvan saw it. It was he told Lawrence. Yes, yes—a skeleton owl, drawn in charcoal, I think. A dangerous condition of the county—very; but only to be expected in a country that prefers General Jackson to John Quincy Adams. I take it as a gentleman of property, your politics are those of Washington and Hamilton, sir."

The old man began to bore me. "Well, sir, I'll bid you good-morning," I said. "Please present my good wishes to Miss Dayton."

"Eh? Oh, certainly, certainly. I will do so. Good-morning, Mr. Irving."

I bowed, and turned away. "By the way," I said. "I have a mount near here. Can't I set you on your way home?"

"Sir? Oh, my mount. Yes, it's waiting for me a few rods back. Mr. Arnold is kind enough to place one at my disposal from time to time. He's very obliging, I'm sure."

I left the old man to his sullen brooding over his rights to Morvan, rights not imaginary, if he but knew the truth. On the other side the thicket the horse Arnold had lent John Dayton was contentedly gnawing at some sassafras twigs. He was a bay, a good sixteen hands high. There was something vaguely familiar about his powerful outline.

As I passed close to his head, he laid back his ears, and rolled a wicked eye at me. Now, I am usually well liked by animals of all sorts. This one's evident hostility struck me with peculiar force. I stopped, and examined him attentively. Full between his eyes, a heavy blow had cut out a little square of flesh.

"By Heaven!" I muttered. "I knew it! It *was* Lawrence Arnold."

XVIII

A DISH OF TEA

NOON found me far on my way to Pole Tavern. After leaving John Dayton, I had felt a sudden distaste for Morvan, and all it meant, and had determined to rid it of my presence for the rest of the day.

I knew of no place more likely to afford me refuge than the hostelry on the Gloucester Road. To exchange thrusts with Peggy, the pretty bound-girl, was better than to mope about the manorhouse. Peggy's saucy ways and honest Irish eyes would be a relief after the insolent whimsies of Ferriss Dayton and the significant glances of Letty Miller.

True, by visiting Pole Tavern I ran some risk, not only from Evans' impertinent curiosity, but also from the possible recognition of chance travelers. However, I felt myself hardy enough to endure the danger. He would be a bold man who would dare to accuse the Squire of Morvan of being Tom Bell, the notorious highwayman.

I was riding along the border of an oak wood when a great hullabaloo broke out on my left.

Before I could pull up, men, dogs, and horses burst upon me from the corner of the grove. The baying of hounds, the cracking of whips, the cries and whoops of the men made a very Bedlam of the Gloucester Road. For a moment I thought the sheriff with his whole *posse comitatus* was at my heels.

A glance at the pack of dogs—six couple if one—and a second at the riders, told me there was no cause for alarm—I had blundered upon a hunt, or rather it had blundered upon me and bade fair to sweep me before it.

A lively young fellow in a green jacket rode at me, shouting: “Which way? Which way, sir? The red fox! Did he break cover this way?”

I waved my hand vaguely. Green Jacket thought he understood. “To the south’ard? Yea-a-a! Come on, gentlemen! We’ll have the old rogue this time, if we run him clear to the bay.” He shouted back at me, his chin on his shoulder. “Won’t you join us, sir? Join us—join us!”

I did so—on the instant. Indeed, I had small choice—the rush of men and horses bore me headlong. I was galloping with the best of them in a trice.

It was devil-take-the-hindmost for a good five minutes, before I had the discretion to reflect a little upon my situation. Here was I, who ought to avoid rather than court public notice, pounding along in full cry with nearly twenty gentlemen!

I glanced about. On my right, a square-set, middle-aged man, spurred fiercely upon a big skewbald. I raced him for a stake-and-rider fence, and beat him to it by a stride. My take-off just ahead of him drew an oath from him and a cry of "Well ridden, sir!" from young Green Jacket. I ranged alongside the latter.

"The Gloucester Hunt, I take it, sir," I managed to say.

"Yes, sir." He whooped like a wild Indian in my very ear as the brush of a big red fox flickered an instant on the rise of a hill. "Yea-a! Gone away! a-wa-a-a-y!"

At last I regained my wits, and began to pull back. The huntsmen speedily forged ahead of me—all except the square-set man on the large skewbald, who kept so long neck-to-neck, that I gazed at him inquiringly. He was favoring me with a puzzled scowl.

When he saw that I was aware of his particular

attention, he clapped spurs to his nag, and went away from me at a great pace. The last I saw of him he had turned in his saddle and was staring back, his face still a-frown.

I could not recall that I had ever seen the man before, yet his actions caused me a deal of uneasiness. Although I was bold enough to face it, yet I was not in a position to submit to any, even a stranger's scrutiny without a qualm.

So little did I like the sound of a chorus ringing from the common-room—it was plain that some of the Gloucester gentlemen had stayed to hunt the tavern fox—that I turned my roan into the horse-sheds without calling for either hostler or landlord.

Entering the house by a side door, the very first person I encountered was Peggy O'Connor. She was in the act of crossing the hall, bearing a salver piled with eatables. She nearly dropped her load when I called her by name.

“Lord! It's Squire Morvan.”

“I have you fairly trapped now, Peggy.”

She laughed up at me, her arms outstretched to support the tray. “Sure, I'm definceless now, that's the truth.”

“I won't take an unkind advantage of you.”

"Ah, Squire—for a man that's got a pair of live devils hidin' in the backs of his eyes, you're the most forbearin' one I ever did see. You'll find the master in the bar, sur."

"I don't care to mix with the company at the bar. I'll go into the parlor."

She barred my way hurriedly. "It's engaged, sur, if you please. I'm carryin' a snack in there now, sur—if you please."

"I'm not sure I do please. There's room for another in the parlor, I suppose."

"Well, sur—I don't know."

"Come, come, Peggy. You're talking nonsense."

"Don't be too sure of that, sur." Her eyes twinkling, she suddenly lifted the salver within an inch of my nose. "Do you smell that, sur?"

"What?" Then as a fragrant aroma arose from a steaming kettle. "Tea! O-oh! it's a lady who's engaged the parlor?"

"It is that! A secret, sur—you've seen her before."

"I have?"

"Sure, you have so—though she hasn't a veil on now."

“What! Peggy, you’re a jewel. Let me have that tray. No, no—I’m her cousin, you know—it’ll be a pleasant surprise for her. You needn’t come in—I’ll do the serving myself. I dare say there’s enough for two here.”

I overrode her protests, and bore the salver into the tavern parlor.

If I had been in any less defiant mood, I would have beaten a retreat before the look that greeted me from the girl at the window-table.

“Sir!” she exclaimed before I could speak, “how dare you! This intrusion——”

“I fancied you’d be surprised, Cousin,” I rejoined pleasantly. “It’s not often you’ve had such a Ganymede as I.” I placed the eatables on the table. “I vow I’m a rare hand at the service of a—goddess.”

“Oh!” she cried. “Oh!” In a very flame of temper she was half-way to the door.

“Don’t rouse the whole house,” I said quickly. “If you leave me like this, I swear I’ll make the place ring with your name. It would be a precious tit-bit for the tavern loungers to know that Miss Dayton refuses to sip tea with her cousin, Mr. Morvan.” From the corner of my eye I saw the shot had told—she came to an uncertain halt.

I began to arrange the tea things, talking carelessly the while. "Yes, the tongues would wag anew over the scandal of the county families. Sit down, Cousin. At least, you can leave me as well after you've drunk a dish of tea as before."

Indignation choked her—yet I noticed, with an inward smile, that she came a step nearer.

"I suppose it is useless to suggest to Mr. Morvan that a gentleman would withdraw——"

"Quite useless," I agreed. "Your chair implores you, Cousin—also, the bohea is growing cold."

With a flutter of her hands—almost as if she were yielding to actual force—she sank into a seat.

I eyed her covertly as I poured her dish of tea. She wore her riding-habit as usual, the close-fitting bodice, the patched skirt, the skinned boot with its bent but shining spur. Of the frayed whip I had robbed her, but I noticed with a pang that the gloves beside her plate were her old ones.

Through the window behind, the sunlight touched her hair, and drew a golden band above her eyebrows. Her red mouth, firm and sweet, trembled a little—reluctantly, as her hands had done.

"Why have you followed me here?" she asked. "I came here to—to be quiet—to be away from—every thing, for a day. Why track me so?"

"I track no one," I answered. "I found you here by chance. I came like yourself, it seems—to be at ease. No, I'll leave tracking to such as are more skilled in owling than I, be it by day or night."

Her eyes fell before mine. She stared into the cup I had slipped in front of her.

"Drink your tea, Cousin," I said. "Hard biscuits, toasted in butter! Yes, and a pot of Mistress Evans' spiced cherries. A feast fit for a queen!"

Mechanically obeying my command, she sipped her tea a little, then began to nibble at biscuit and jam.

"I don't know what to make of you sometimes," she said.

"Cousin Ferriss, there's a Lucifer and a Gabriel in every man—that's an old story. But I confess to you, the devil in me ramps more fiercely than he does in many a worse man."

"You mean you find it hard to keep him chained?" She was almost smiling.

"Yes. He's unchained now—since I first saw you here—when was it?—ten days ago."

The smile was undoubted now, though faint.
“I hope not *because* you saw me.”

“God knows,” I said so gloomily that her smile died.

“Ferriss,” I said after a heavy silence, “I haven’t forced my company upon you to talk about angels and devils. Yesterday morning, when we talked at Saint Peter’s after the wedding, no one was ever more gracious than you.”

The spoon rattled against the china as she stirred her tea with many pauses. I went on. “But yesterday evening you passed me by without a sign.” A deep flush crept into her cheek. “Oh, I know why *now*, but I didn’t dream *then*—I swear it! Ferriss, I don’t deserve your censure. I stumbled on her by the merest chance.” Sudden indignation overwhelmed me. “Damn Lawrence Arnold!”

“Sir?”

“I beg your pardon. But when I think of such a contemptible villain——”

“I don’t mind your swearing. That isn’t it. Mr. Arnold—you say——”

“Oh. I supposed you knew *why* she is, as well as *what* she is.”

"I didn't—until now." She drew a sharp breath. "The beast!"

Again there was a heavy silence, she frowning straight ahead of her as if remembering with disgust whatever attentions she may have received from Arnold.

"Ferriss," I said at last, "I beg you to believe——"

"Ah, Cousin," she said. "I do—I do. I knew I was unjust, a moment after I'd treated you so, last night."

"Thank Heaven! As for Arnold, he's nursing sore bones just now, as you know."

"I've heard you beat him—for trespassing on your land."

"I mean last night's affair."

She gave me a sharp glance. "Last night's?"

"Child," I exclaimed, "I vow I wonder at you. Shame upon you! Do you believe me so simple as to think you a very innocent?"

"What happened last night?" she said in her peremptory fashion.

I confess I was more amused than vexed. "What sort of moonshine is this? Don't you really know that I rode fair into Arnold and his Pine Owls last night? His unlucky nag got a taste of the

bludgeon I meant for his master. Would you have me believe that he didn't come to Chestnut Farms last night—to soothe his shaken ribs—and for your sympathy, Cousin?"

My last gibe was bitter. I repented it too late, but she gave it only the notice of a glowing cheek. Her fingers tapped the table in abstraction.

"Last night," she said, "very late, I heard horse's hoofs—as if some one were riding very carefully through the apple-orchard. But I thought I must be dreaming. Could it have been—I wonder——"

Her eyes, slowly widening, stirred a profound pity in me.

"Cousin," she went on, "I'm glad—oh, so glad!—you found me here. But won't you leave me now? I must think—think." Her voice trailed away.

I rose at once. "I'm utterly at your service—always, Ferriss. I wish—we knew each other better. We might trust each other more."

Her faint smile, grown very sad, lingered upon me as I fumbled with my cloak.

"Sometime, Cousin, perhaps. Now—I want to think."

In another moment, I was galloping back toward Morvan.

XIX

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE

MR. THOMAS STOCKTON arrived from Trenton late the third day. A short man, with iron-gray hair and square jaw, dismounted with him at my door. His horse was a big skewbald.

Only once before in my life—when the landlord had whispered in my ear at Pole Tavern—had I had such a shock as went through me when my eyes fell upon this man! Not only did I know him at once as the square-set man who had frowned at me the day before from the group of huntsmen, but—far worse!—I now recognized him as an old acquaintance. Did he recognize me?

To this day I take credit to myself that I was able to greet Mr. Stockton coolly enough.

“I’m glad to see you back, sir.”

“Glad to be seen back, Henry,” returned the lawyer. “I hate to travel—had enough of it in the Navy. Henry, this is Mr. James Hubbard—another reliable man. What! One of my precautions, you see. Yes, a precaution.”

I looked the square-set man carelessly in the eye.

“Welcome to Morvan, Mr. Hubbard.”

He gave my extended hand a firm grip. “Thank you, Squire,” he responded in a rather harsh voice. “I’m at your service, sir.”

His manner was civil, and he looked at me no more than was proper—and eight years ago I had been a mere slip of a lad! I held myself steadily in hand.

“Has anything happened since our pretty wedding?” asked Mr. Stockton. “Any little flogging of innocent charcoal-burners? Any love-letters from Pine Owl? Any snakes or witches visited you from the pines?”

“I’ve had a skirmish that will interest you.”

“What! I didn’t suppose the rascals would make a move so soon. Anyone hurt, Henry?”

“No. The affair was an accident, I think. Shall I tell you about it, now, or after we’ve had dinner? It’s about ready.”

“If you’re asking me, I vote for after dinner,” volunteered Mr. Hubbard. “I can always listen better when I ain’t so hungry—or so dry.”

“By Gad!” exclaimed Bram behind us. “That’s the sort of talk I like to hear. Can’t listen when he’s dry!”

“How are you, Mr. Bram?” said the lawyer. “Mr. Hubbard, this is Mr. Bramfield Morvan, Mr. Henry Morvan’s cousin.”

“Oh, this is Mr. Bram Morvan?” repeated the newcomer. He shook hands with a force that made even Bram wince. “I’m glad to make your acquaintance, sir. If I’m not mistaken I had the honor of seeing you—at a distance—at a distance—at Burlington races last year. Yes, sir, I believe in something wet to clear the hearing and the voice, too.”

I was about to follow the lawyer to the Washington Room, whither he had gone to prepare for dinner, when I noticed Sam in the hall. He had just returned from his daily ride to the Dayton farmstead. At my sign, he followed me to the library.

“Everything’s all right, I suppose, Sam. How is Miss Ferriss to-day?”

“Why, Mastah Henry,” said the boy, “Miss Ferriss ain’t been home all day—ain’t nobody knows wha’ she is.”

“You mean Jerry doesn’t know.”

“Yas, sah, tha’s what I mean, o’ co’se. Mebbe the ole man knows, but Jerry ain’t dast to ast him.

The ole man got one of his bad spells—pain in his haid or sumthin’—and he’s locked hisself in ’is room, and tole Jerry if anybody disturb he’ll sho’ly ree-gret it—yas, sah, ree-gret it.”

“Miss Ferriss often takes long rides.”

“Yas, sah, but Jerry, he says she ain’t nevah been gone so long befo’. He’s kind a worrit about it. She went off this mawnin’, right aftah b’eak-fus’, and she look real ekcited. Look like she’d been fussin’ with ole Mastah Jawn, Jerry says.”

“Very likely. I don’t believe we need worry about her. Jerry doesn’t know where she goes, or when, half the time, although he thinks he does.”

At dinner, Mr. Stockton and I talked on indifferent matters—the condition of the postroads, the crops, and the hunting, the official and private character of General Jackson, and finally, the old families of the Jerseys.

“Families rise and fall like kingdoms,” remarked the lawyer. “Even what we call a great family can only be great in one line of it. Did you ever think of you Morvans, Henry? The grant your great-great-grandfather got from Lord Berkeley is still yours. You’re the direct descendant—you’re a power. But where are all the other

members of the family—or of any other county family, of course? Did you ever think that from the Morvans there must have been born into the world scores of brave men, and pretty girls, by this time? Where are they? What! Some up in the world—more down, though, more down. Some of the girls—well, I shudder to think what some of them must have become. And as for the men—some of *them* are probably in the Barrens, now—envying you, Henry. Even Bram, there, may be. Eh, Mr. Bram, who knows? ”

My “cousin” had been prosecuting his acquaintance with Mr. Hubbard. A bowl of hot punch had made them sworn friends—over it they gravely discussed the relative merits of Santa Cruz and Jamaica, mulled and plain cider, and grew almost rapturous over a peach brandy that Hubbard declared he had drunk at a certain tavern in Delaware. However absorbed Bram had been in this congenial conversation, he must have had one ear cocked toward us, for he replied to Mr. Stockton’s remark hastily.

“Eh, by Gad! Envyin’ Hal? Not I. I don’t envy any man. As long as there’s a pretty woman in the world—in West Jersey, d’ye see?—

I don't care for forty Morvans. Are you with me, Mr. Stockton?"

I knew the shameless fellow was thinking of Miss Katharine Arnold. I buried my nose in a glass of wine to hide my disgust, but the lawyer seemed to think Bram's words required a serious answer.

"A pretty woman is well enough, Bramfield. More, I say she is very well, indeed. But you can't love liquor and a woman too. Mind that, sir—mind that." He spoke sharply.

"Better love liquor than love a woman after Bram's fashion," I thought, but held my peace.

"You're wrong by the book, Mr. Stockton," cried Bram. "You know what old Martin Luther said:

'Who loves not wine, woman, and song,
Remains a fool his whole life long.'

That's good enough authority for any man, d'ye see?"

"Luther threw his wit around as freely as he did his inkpot," retorted the lawyer, "and for the same reason too—to shame the devil, to shame the devil."

From time to time, during the course of our

meal, I eyed Mr. Hubbard, half expecting him to rise at any moment and clap a pistol to my head. Yet he gave not the least sign that he had seen me before that night. His conversation was chiefly confined to: "My respects to you, sir," or: "Mr. Bram, let's have another glass of this bumbo—it's warming on a coldish night like this." His speech grew steadily thicker as the evening wore on.

At last the lawyer rose. "Henry, I've some business to go over with you. You'll excuse us, Bramfield. Hubbard, we'll leave you with Mr. Bram."

"All right, sir," answered Hubbard. "I dare say Mr. Bram and me can take care of this last brew." He peered into the bowl with semi-drunken gravity.

Mr. Stockton and I betook ourselves to the library. He seated himself at my secretary, and from an inner pocket of his coat produced a bundle of papers.

"There they are, Henry—there they are. Precautions—highly useful, official precautions. Hum! let me see."

"They look like warrants," I hazarded.

"They are—they are warrants—some of them.

Ah, here we are." He began to read. "'Supreme Court of the State of New Jersey. Whereas'—hum, hum!—'therefore'—hum! I'll spare you all that. 'To seize, arrest, and detain, by whatsoever lawful means may be necessary, the person of one Bramfield Morvan.'"

"Bram!"

"I hope it won't be necessary. A precaution, mind—a precaution. Here's another. Hum! 'Seize etcetera, etcetera, one Lawrence Arnold.' And here's the omnibus warrant. 'One Davis, one William Garrison, one Lenz, one John Doe, one Richard Roe, and all other persons whatsoever, unlawfully assembled for, etcetera, etcetera.' Spare you that, Henry."

"Do you intend to summon a *posse*, and try to serve those warrants? We've nothing but suspicions."

"No, we won't try to serve 'em. We'll await events. Something is bound to happen before long."

I fumbled some papers carelessly. "Mr. Stockton, who's your peculiar friend, Mr. Hubbard?" I asked. "Do you call him a reliable man?"

"Hubbard? He's one of the best police offi-

cers in the Jerseys. I dare say he's brought more footpads and coiners to the gallows, than any man in the country. It was he caught Tom Bell in East Jersey some years ago—the fellow who robbed the British ambassador. Possibly you've heard of the affair."

"I've forgotten the particulars," I muttered.

"Well, this Bell took some important dispatches from the Britisher, along with the guineas. Unluckily for himself, poor devil!"

I managed to make an inarticulate sound.

"Yes," ran on the lawyer, "some important secret dispatches of His Britannic Majesty's—His Satannic Majesty, as we used to say in the first war. Ha, ha! I've heard that there were politics in that highway robbery—*un coup diplomatique* on the part of our own Government. What! The highwayman was caught easily enough, but not the dispatches. No, no, not the dispatches!"

"But this Hubbard."

"Oh, yes. Well, just now he's special bailiff for the Supreme Court—appointed by the Governor, Henry, at the request of the Chief Justice—the said request made on my endorsement. What! Hubbard's here as Supreme Court bailiff, with plen-

ary powers; but he's only to exercise said powers at the discretion of Thomas Stockton, Esquire."

"So *you* are really the special bailiff with plenary powers."

"You're right. You ought to have been a lawyer, Henry."

"It seems to me, sir," I said, "you've made a poor choice for your bailiff. The man is three parts drunk now."

"Eh?" The lawyer stared, and then chuckled. "Ha, ha! Ring the bell, will you, Henry, and send for him."

In a minute or two the bailiff joined us. His square body was as upright, and his legs were as steady, as my own.

"What luck, Hubbard?" demanded Mr. Stockton.

"None at all, sir," responded the other—there was no indistinctness in his tones. "I've got the gentleman half-seas over, but he's as close as a clam. He's singing some song about a girl and a bottle—but he don't say a word to help any."

"May be there's nothing to tell," suggested the lawyer."

"Well, sir, I ain't real sure he's as much in

liquor as he's making out. May be he was playing fox with me as well as me with him."

"I think he turned the same trick with me once," I remarked. "I once went out at night, leaving him drunk, as I thought, and saw him later the same night as sober as a judge."

"Hum—hum!" said the lawyer. "Sit down, Hubbard. Now, Henry, what about that skirmish, if you please? Did you have a fight for it? What!"

I narrated my encounter with Pine Owl, leaving out all reference to what I had seen at Fairview. My two guests followed my story with the closest attention. When I came to how I had felled the horse in the road, Hubbard interrupted me.

"You've a guess who the man was, I suppose, sir."

"I'm almost sure of him," I declared. "It was Lawrence Arnold."

"What!" exclaimed Mr. Stockton. "What makes you so sure, Henry? How do you know it was Arnold?"

I told them of my meeting with John Dayton the next day, and how I had recognized the bay horse lent my cousin by Arnold as the one Pine Owl

had ridden. Hubbard and the lawyer exchanged glances.

“What I don’t understand is this,” I said. “Bram wants Morvan—that’s natural enough. Also, he wants to marry Miss Ferriss Dayton. You remember I gathered that from what old Mary Pederson said in the cabin?”

The lawyer nodded. “Yes, yes. That’s what she meant, undoubtedly.”

“That’s natural, too,” I went on. “But granting those two points, why does he lend himself to make threats of violence against me? The Pine Owls tell me to leave the county. How does that help Bram—either to Morvan, or to my cousin Ferriss?”

“It helps to Miss Dayton, certainly,” said the lawyer. “A handsome young man like you—rich, too? What! If I were courting the young woman, I’d want you out of the way—the further, the better. But——”

“Then here’s another thing,” I interrupted. “Arnold is hopeful of marrying Miss Dayton, too. It must be that he and Bram are at cross-purposes there.”

“Very likely—very likely. There isn’t much

honor among thieves, in spite of the proverb. Eh, Hubbard?"

"Mighty little, sir. If there was, my business would be a good deal harder than it is."

"I can't believe Miss Dayton knows all the deviltry in this matter," I said. "It's impossible that even the family feud could make her help to have me beaten, and perhaps murdered."

"Women are queer, sir," said the Court bailiff.

"Yes," agreed the lawyer, "it's true, Henry. You can never know where they stand. I admit Miss Dayton looks like a good girl—a very sweet, and noble girl. But I dare say Paris thought the same of Helen, and Antony did of Cleopatra, yet they were the very ones who ought to have known better. What! Women are led by their affections—yes, or by their hates—but mostly by their affections. Now, if she's fond, downright fond, either of Arnold or of Bram, she'd——"

"I don't believe she cares a jot for either," I cried.

"Eh? May be not—may be not," said the lawyer, considerably taken aback by my heat. "Well, there's one point we know about—you didn't let me finish. I've about made up my mind how Bram or

Arnold, if he had Miss Ferriss, would have Morvan too."

"How?" I demanded. "They'd have to murder me first."

"Oh, no, they wouldn't," said Mr. Stockton. He rose, and stalked about the room, squaring his shoulders, and wheeling with abrupt gestures. "In law it never pays to go to sleep—never in the world. I went through all the records, when I was in Trenton. I saw the original deed from Lord Berkeley to the first Morvan, Henry. Berkeley had absolute proprietary rights, remember—could do as he pleased. Now, of course, he wanted to get his grants settled—permanently settled."

The lawyer shook his finger at me, as if addressing a jury, his long, thin face keen as a hawk's above his ruffled shirt and black broadcloth. "Now, mark me! I found that under his rights as Lord Proprietor—and those rights are as good in our law to-day as they ever were—mind that! Under his patent, I say, Berkeley granted this section of the county to John Morvan on condition—mark me! on condition, that——"

A loud knocking at the library door interrupted him in full swing.

"Come in!" I called impatiently. "Confound it! Come in."

The door opened hurriedly, and a servant entered.

"What do you want, Sam?" I demanded. "Don't you know I'm busy?" I checked myself. The rolling eyes and wide mouth were not Sam's, after all. "Jerry! What's the matter? Has anything happened—to her, Jerry?"

"Well, sah, I dunno, sah. I——" He looked at Mr. Stockton and the bailiff.

"Speak out," I ordered.

"Mastah Henry, Grayboy come home alone, a while ago."

"Alone?"

"Yas, sah. He come wand'rin' in all by hisself. Theyah wa'n't nobody aridin' 'im. *She* wa'n't, nor nobody."

"Good Heavens! Has she been thrown?"

"I dunno. I don't guess she has, sah. Theyah ain't no hoss kin throw her, and Grayboy he wouldn't nohow. Ah'm scairt mebbe sumpin's happened to her, though."

"What?"

"I dunno—theys some bad folks round here,

sah—plenty o' ragscallions in the woods." He stared at me helplessly.

My mind was in a whirl—I returned his stare without speaking.

"Who's the boy talking about?" asked Hubbard.

"Miss Dayton," said the lawyer. "The daughter of Mr. John Dayton."

"Oh," said the bailiff. "Mr. John Dayton's daughter." He instantly took up the questioning.

"Boy, did the horse look as if he'd been ridden hard?"

"Yas, sah. Ah hum-m, no, sah. He had some mud on 'im, and they was scratches on his laigs. Looks like as though he's been in briahts, or mebbe mudholes; but theyah wa'n't no lather on 'im."

"Any marks on the saddle or stirrup? Any pieces of cloth or stains? Think now."

"No, sah. I'm ce'tain they aint."

"A plain case of pulled away," interrupted Mr. Stockton. "Miss Dayton was probably leading her nag through some rough ground, and the brute got hungry and left her. Nothing to worry about, Henry—nothing to worry about."

I felt and Jerry looked rather foolish.

“Ah guess mebbe tha’s so, sah,” said the boy. “But she’s been gone all day, and Ah was kind a scairt. It’s gittin’ on to midnight, too.”

“Did you let Mr. Dayton know about the horse?” asked Hubbard.

“Ah went in to tell ’im, but he wa’n’t theyah.”

“Wasn’t in the house?”

“He wa’n’t down stairs. When he shet hisself up in his room, they ain’t nobody dast go near him—not even Miss Ferriss.”

“Well, Jerry,” I said drily, “you nearly made a fool of me with your cock-and-bull story. Go home, and have some hot supper ready for your mistress. She’ll come in tired and hungry from walking across country after Grayboy. Very likely she’s home now.”

“Yas, sah,” said the boy sheepishly.

At that moment a faint sound penetrated the room—a call that rings in my heart to this day.

“Henry! Cousin! Quick!”

There was something so wild and pitiful in the cry that I was thrilled.

“Good God! what’s that?”

The bailiff and the lawyer looked at each other, and then at me.

"Did you think you heard anything, sir?" asked the bailiff.

"Henry! Cousin! Quick!" This time the cry rang clearly in the room.

We all sprang to our feet. "He's right," said the lawyer. "A woman's voice, too."

"It's Ferriss!" I exclaimed.

I was already in the hall. They dashed after me. At the front door we found ourselves surrounded by Baker, Buckaloo, and half a dozen servants.

"Be careful, sir," cried Hubbard behind me. "This may be a trick. A quick shot can get you from the near clump of trees, if you open up—you'll be against the light."

For a moment I hesitated. Then the call sounded startlingly near. "Quick! Open the door! Open the door!"

Hubbard and Baker dashed out the candles as I flung back the heavy panels. From the moonlit night without a woman tottered into the pitch-black hall. I caught her as she was about to fall.

"Oh, oh!" she cried. "Who is it?"

"It's I—Henry Morvan."

"Oh, Cousin," she said. "You—you——." She had fainted in my arms.

XX

REPTILES

FIVE minutes later Ferriss opened puzzled eyes upon me from the settle in the library.

In that time much had been accomplished. Hubbard, divining a dire emergency, had taken vigorous charge of the household.

The servants had been hustled off to their own quarters. Sam and Dick were stationed at the rear entrance, shotgun in hand. Buckaloo was placed on guard near the side-door, his position on a staircase enabling him to command the passage through a narrow window.

Baker had taken his stand on the roof of the porch above the main door. Strict orders were given to all to let no one pass in or out. Mr. Stockton and I kept our weapons at hand and, although the Court bailiff produced none of his own, I was well assured he was not without one. In five minutes the house had been made ready for a siege.

Mr. Stockton, Hubbard, Sue Baker, and I were watching Ferriss when she came to herself. She

gazed up at me a moment—her eyes luminous beneath their level brows—then tried to sit up.

“Oh, Cousin,” she cried. “They’re coming to attack you to-night.”

“We’re ready for them,” I answered. “See!” I held up my double-barreled Manton.

“But there are at least twenty of them,” she said. “Perhaps more. I don’t know how many. I’ve only learned to-night how little I’ve known before. They may be here at any moment.”

“Ferriss,” I said gently, “tell us what has happened.”

“Oh, the snake!” she cried. “It was horrible! And Mr. Arnold wouldn’t listen to me. He lied—he lied to me from the very first. I’ve been a fool—and I’ve been wicked!”

The girl was on the verge of hysteria. Although it nearly broke my heart to do so, it was necessary to adopt a different tone with her.

“Cousin,” I said sternly, “there has been lying by others besides Arnold. You! Haven’t you been lying to me ever since I came here—lying by words and actions? Perhaps you’re here as a spy, now.” She looked up at me pitifully, but I continued. “I’ve seen you in the cabin in Lost Hollow, talking

as a friend with a woman I know to be a very fiend. Why do you gallop about the country at all hours of the night—as I know you do? What sort of girl is it who'll write proclamations for the Pine Owls? ”

“ Oh! ” she said. Her eyes brimmed with tears. “ Ah, but I deserve it. ” She struggled to control herself. “ I'll tell you everything—by and by—but the Pine Owls are coming here to-night. This morning I went for a ride. I'd been worried by—by thinking too much. ” Her eyes fell before mine. “ I rode as far as I could—in the afternoon I came to Mary Pedersen's cabin. Mary! ” She shuddered.

“ I warned you against her. ”

“ Oh, yes. But I didn't believe you. I didn't wish to believe you. ”

“ What happened in the cabin? ” urged Mr. Stockton. “ The old woman lost some of her sweetness. What! Dropped the mask, did she? ”

“ Not at first. She talked to me as gently as ever, for a long time. After a while she made tea. She insisted so hard I should drink some that I remembered what you had written me, Cousin, and I refused to take it. I caught her scowling at me

behind my back—I was frightened. Before I could make up my mind to go, Mr. Arnold came in.”

“Ah,” remarked Hubbard. “Mr. Lawrence Arnold of Fairview. Very good.”

“Yes. He had been drinking. I started to go then, but they insisted I should stay. I began to be very much afraid, but I didn’t know what to do.”

“Poor child,” I said.

She smiled wistfully. “Mary and Mr. Arnold were determined to have me sit with them while they drank.”

“The woman drank, too, did she?” asked the bailiff.

“Oh, yes. After Mr. Arnold came in she began drinking steadily. By and by, a man they call ‘Brownie’ came in, and then more and more men, until the place was full.”

“And you alone with them,” I said.

She hung her head. “I wasn’t so much afraid of the piners hurting *me*. I had seen the man ‘Brownie’ and two or three of the others before. But I knew all those men must have come together for some violence. I soon found out from their talk they were coming to attack Morvan—and you.”

“They’ll be made welcome.”

“When I understood, I said I wouldn’t allow it. They only laughed at me. Then I told them that when I’d agreed to help Mr. Arnold frighten you away, he had said there would never be anyone hurt—he’d promised me that if you wouldn’t go, we would give up the plan.” She faced me suddenly. “Cousin, that day at Pole Tavern, I couldn’t play my part—I couldn’t warn you in desperate earnest—because I didn’t really believe you would be in desperate danger. And I didn’t write those notices from Pine Owl. I suppose Mr. Arnold did. The one you saw in my belt that same day at Pole Tavern he had given me to post where you would be sure to see it. But I didn’t post it at all—the paper was too dirty.”

“What!” exclaimed the lawyer. “That proves it never pays to take a woman into a conspiracy. Wouldn’t post the notice because the paper was too dirty!”

“Go ahead, ma’am, if you please,” said Hubbard. “What happened after you’d told ’em you were deeper in the mire than you’d bargained for?”

“I said they all knew they had beaten that poor Buckaloo without my knowledge—I would

never have consented to it. I told them they mustn't attack Morvan."

"Well?" urged Mr. Stockton. "What then?"

"They laughed at me. The man 'Brownie' said the bargain between Mr. Arnold and me was nothing to them—what they were after was the plunder. The bargain they had made was for the money and plate in Morvan, and they would have it if they had to kill you to get it. Then I said I'd come and warn you."

"Good Heavens!" I cried. "They might have murdered you."

"I thought they would, at first. But Mr. Arnold made them be quiet. He said I was a fool, but they'd simply leave me there with Mary to watch me, until it was all over. Then the others went out to make ready, but Mr. Arnold and Mary made me sit down by the fire—and made that awful snake coil down near me, too. Oh!" She buried her face in her hands.

"The hellcat!" I said.

"But I was almost as much afraid of Mr. Arnold as I was of the snake. He kept looking at me so strangely, and he'd taken far too much liquor. Then 'Brownie' called to him to come out—they

were ready to go. He said they wouldn't wait any longer for Bram Morvan. They cursed Bram, too—because he wasn't on time, I suppose."

We three men exchanged glances.

"I saw the piners file past the door, with Mr. Arnold leading them—they were horrible. Each one had a black cloth over his face and head."

"After they were gone Mary taunted me. She said she had waited for years to get revenge upon me—and until that afternoon I had always thought she loved me."

"What can she have against you?"

Ferriss blushed hotly. "She'd been my father's housekeeper so long that—that at last she wanted to be his wife. I never heard of it until she taunted me to-night. She *asked* father to marry her—years ago. He was outraged, and had discharged her at once. She had taken it into her head that if I had not been in the way, father might have consented—so she has hated me ever since."

"How did you get away, ma'am?" asked the bailiff.

"Mary drank until she began to fall into a stupor. As she grew sleepy she talked to the snake as if it were a human being."

“By Heaven!” I said. “It’s a pity we can’t burn witches nowadays.”

“Just so,” agreed the lawyer. “The woman deserves death at the stake.”

“Then she fell asleep. She’d stuck the candle on the table, and the melting tallow ran into her white hair—she’d fallen asleep with her head on the table.” Ferriss’ eyes widened. “And I knew I must come to warn you. But if I barely breathed, the snake would hiss frightfully—frightfully—and its eyes were so cold. Then I put my face in my hands and prayed and prayed to be brave. And then——.” A long shudder shook her from head to foot.

“What then?” I muttered huskily.

“Then I killed the snake—with the poker—and came to you.”

Strong men as we were, each drew a sharp breath.

“Dear,” I began, and could say no more.

The bailiff was clamping his jaws together. Mr. Stockton blew his nose fiercely. “A brave girl, Henry—a brave girl. What!”

“It seems to me if the candle was ’most burned down to the table when the young lady left the

cabin," said Hubbard, "and the table was pine-wood—was it a pine table, ma'am?"

Ferriss nodded.

"If the candle, not bein' in a holder, burned down to that fat pine-wood, may be your witch has got her punishment, by this time."

"Well," he went on, "one snake's had its back broke by a poker, and another's got herself singed very likely, but there's still a whole knot of 'em alive—and headed this way."

XXI

THE ATTACK

PROPPED against Sue Baker's shoulder, Ferriss looked from Mr. Stockton to me, as if awaiting sentence for her sins. My heart was beating in my throat—I could not find a word to say.

Buckaloo opened the library door, and thrust in his head. "Can I speak to you, gentlemen? Mr. Bram, he's——"

"I understand," interrupted the lawyer. "Hold him there, Buckaloo—very well done. Miss Ferriss, we'll leave you with Sue. Take care of her, Sue." He caught up his documents from my desk. "Come on, gentlemen—I've been expecting this."

He went out, the bailiff at his heels. I lingered a moment.

"Ferriss, if we're attacked, the safest place for you is here in the library. Sue will stay with you. Don't be frightened if you hear firing—no bullet can get through those oak shutters, dear."

"Be careful," she whispered. "Oh, be careful." I raised her hand to my lips, then hurried into the hall, closing the door behind me.

I found Bram facing Mr. Stockton and Hubbard. He was cloaked and spurred for a ride. Behind him, Buckaloo leaned sullenly on his fowlingpiece.

"This idiot wouldn't let me pass," said Bram impatiently. "He said he had orders not to let anybody in or out. Swore he'd shoot me if I stirred, by Gad! I told him the orders weren't meant to apply to me, but he wouldn't budge."

"The orders *are* meant to apply to you," I said, "particularly to you."

"Eh? What's that! D'ye mean I can't go out when I like?"

"You can't go out to-night."

"Why, by Gad! Hal, this is tyranny," he raged. "Damned if I'll endure it!" By a great effort he managed to change his tone. "Why do you publish this ironclad order to-night of all others?"

"Bram," I said gravely, "if you hadn't been immured in your own room for the last hour, you'd know that Ferriss Dayton is here—here with news that the ragamuffins from the swamp may attack this instant."

His disdainful humor vanished. "Ferriss?

Here with that news! You don't say so? I was busy getting into riding togs and didn't hear. But the Pine Owls, you say? Pshaw, man! They'll never dare attack Morvan—never in the world. I'd stand by you on the chance, though, if I could, but I'm bound to go out to-night, d'ye see?—bound in honor."

"You're bound to stay," I answered.

He turned on the lawyer. "Mr. Stockton, you know——"

"I know nothing about it," snapped the lawyer, "nothing about it, Mr. Bram."

Bram stared at him, then again addressed himself to me. "Hang it, Hal, this won't do! Look here—I must go. I can't disappoint a woman, you know."

"Shame, sir," I said. "I do know—I know too well."

"Eh! Why, man——"

The lawyer made a sign to Hubbard. The latter intervened briskly. "It's no use, sir. If you won't stay willin', you must unwillin'." He took a paper from Mr. Stockton and touched Bram lightly upon the shoulder. "Bramfield Morvan, I arrest you as an accessory before and after the fact

in the assault and battery upon Timothy Buckaloo."

Bram paled, but stood his ground. He glared at the lawyer.

"Is this a joke, Mr. Stockton? If it is, it's gone far enough. You know very well——"

The bailiff went on harshly. "Also, for conspiring to work bodily harm to the person of Henry Morvan, Esquire; also, for robbing divers persons by force and violence on the public way."

"It's a lie!" cried Bram. "It's a damned lie!" He lifted his whip threateningly.

"For Heaven's sake, don't oblige us to use force," I said. "We're prepared to go to extremes with you—you've brought this upon yourself." I pointed to a chair. "Sit there, sir, and pray that we have no bloodshed here to-night."

He glared about—everywhere stern faces confronted him. All at once he flung down his whip with a fierce oath. Dropping his cloak and hat, he sank heavily into the chair. His head bent forward, and his legs outstretched, he scowled straight before him. He sat thus through all that followed. During the wild events of that night, I believe he neither spoke nor moved.

The affair was settled none too soon—Jerry touched me on the arm.

"Mastah Henry, Baker he says come quick. Theys a lot o' folks comin' up through the meadow."

"To your posts, gentlemen," I ordered. "Jerry, go tell Miss Ferriss not to be afraid—and stay near her."

Mr. Stockton hurried to help Dick at the rear. Sam joined Buckaloo for the defense of the side-door. Hubbard and I ran up the staircase, and stepped upon the porch roof beside Baker. Shotgun poised, he was peering into the darkness.

"What do you see, Baker?"

"I don't see much, sir," returned the farmer, "but I thought I heard a kind of trampin' over there." He motioned with his weapon.

Sheltered by the tall columns of the porch, we held our breath and listened.

The night was cold and overcast. The moon was up, but, hidden by the clouds, gave only a diffused and uncertain light. Although one might descry an object within twenty or thirty yards, beyond all was lost in haze.

Then a weird thing happened. A man, mounted upon a powerful horse, rode abruptly out of the mist. He sat erect, with what seemed a rifle across his saddlebow. Above his broad shoulders, where

his face ought to have been, was only a hideous outline in black.

“Pine Owl!” I breathed in Hubbard’s ear.

Behind the horseman a line of masked men on foot issued from the darkness and began to move toward the door.

“Now, sir,” muttered the bailiff, “better stop ’em before they get too close.”

I threw my German rifle into the hollow of my arm, and stepped from behind the pillar.

“Halt, there!” I shouted. “Now then, gentlemen—what do you want?”

The effect of my challenge was magical. The footmen hesitated one instant—then, turning, were swallowed by the night. Only Pine Owl himself remained. He lifted his head—the shapeless black face stared up at me. Then very slowly the horse began to move backward. Inch by inch the haze crept from tail to haunch—to saddle. The figure of the rider melted away. For an instant the horse’s head stood out—then it, too, was gone.

We gazed at each other. The whole thing might almost have been a ghostly apparition.

“Just so,” said the bailiff. “We did the surprisin’ they thought they were goin’ to do. Better

get under cover, sir—that was a rifle the leader had. He might——”

A stream of fire shot from the darkness, followed by a sharp report. A tiny shower of splinters flew from the pillar not an inch above my head. I sprang for shelter.

“Are you hit, Squire?” cried Baker.

“No.”

“A close call,” commented Hubbard coolly. “If it hadn’t been so hazy, he’d had you all right. I guess the mist sort of made your head look bigger than it was. They mean business, that’s sure. Well, so do I, if that’s their game.” He drew a pair of huge horse-pistols from the flaps of his waistcoat.

“Squiah,” said Dick’s voice behind us, “Mastah Thomas wants to know if anybody’s hurt, and do you want him to come here.”

“No. Tell him we expect another attack soon. Keep a sharp lookout at the rear, there.”

Five or six men came into our range of vision at a run. They bore what must have been axes and billets of wood. In the lead, rifle in hand, ran a broadshouldered man on foot—I knew it must be Lawrence Arnold.

“Halt!” I cried. “Halt, or we’ll fire into you!”

“Fire and be damned!” roared the leader. “Come on, boys!”

“Fire!” I shouted.

At the word, Baker and Dick emptied their pieces into the crowd. There were several shrill cries. The whole group turned and ran back as before. Only the leader stood his ground.

“Come on, you cowards!” he cried, his voice sounding muffled behind the black bag that hid his face. “Come on. There’s only a nigger or two.”

Several of his followers halted. I saw they would regain their courage in another instant. I crouched by the porch rail.

“Go back!” I called. “I know you, sir. I warn you, we’ll shoot to kill if you compel us.”

His rifle leaped to his shoulder by way of answer. Our pieces sounded like one report. Even as I fired I remembered Mr. Stockton’s favorite maxim: “Aim at his kneecap.”

Again I had a narrow escape—the bullet was buried in the balustrade that shielded my throat. But the half-ounce ball from my German rifle struck Pine Owl below the knee and smashed the bone. He

uttered a harsh scream, and crumpled to the earth. His followers dragged him away.

“That’s the style,” said the bailiff in grim approval. “A good shot, sir. I’ll bet he don’t do any more owling for one while. Baker and the boy peppered some of the others, too.”

“Dick,” I ordered, “get back to Mr. Stockton.”

The boy hurried away, and I turned to Hubbard.

“I’m sure that was Arnold. He’s down—that ought to discourage the others. He’s the moving spirit—the rest are only a cowardly mob.”

“I ain’t so sure about that,” responded the bailiff. “There’s another fellow in the gang is a good deal of a fighter.”

“‘Brownie’ Davis? Charging a house full of armed men is different from gouging out eyes—or even robbing a traveler.”

“That’s so. Yes, I guess Arnold’s got all he wants to-night, but——”

The sound of a horse’s hoofs interrupted him. The animal, hidden by the mist, seemed to move from front to rear of the house at full gallop.

“Can Arnold have mounted again?” I exclaimed. “With a wounded leg!”

A fusillade of shots broke out from the rear. With it came the sound of furious blows against the back door. And above the turmoil, the voice of Mr. Stockton rang through the rooms, calling upon us for help.

“Stay here, Baker,” I cried. “Come on, Hubbard.”

“Just so,” grunted the bailiff, as we raced madly down the staircase. “That try at the front was only a blind.” We sped past the side-entrance. “We’ll need you, Buckaloo,” he shouted.

As we ran into the back hall, the door leaped upon its hinges, and the whole place trembled with a mighty blow. Two pistol-shots sounded from the room above, answered by a regular volley from without. We heard the sound of breaking glass. Then Mr. Stockton bounded down the back staircase, his face sprinkled with blood.

“Only cut a little by the glass,” he exclaimed. “By the Eternal! they’ve got a battering-ram. They’ll be through that door in a jiffy. We can’t hit anybody from the window above there—it’s too far to one side.”

A shower of blows—from hammers and axes—descended on the door. The panels threatened to yield at any instant.

The bailiff advanced. "Now then," he shouted, "be quiet there!" His stentorian tones must have penetrated to the besiegers—a silence fell. "I'm an officer of the law," roared the bailiff. "I call upon you to disperse."

A pistol ball, discharged through a panel, ripped a flap of Hubbard's waistcoat, and shattered the face of the tall clock beside my head. A harsh voice sounded without.

"Kill the new squire! Tar and feather Bram Morvan, and plunder the house!"

"No, no!" cried the voice of 'Brownie' Davis. "Use the hickories on everybody else, but kill Bram Morvan, by God! He's turned traitor!"

"Bring up the log," ordered the hoarse tones again. "One more try, and we'll be through."

Hubbard's face set in grim lines. "Gentlemen," he said hurriedly, "for the peace of the State, we'll have to make an example of some of these fellows. I happen to know their leader is a professed highwayman. Pull up that settle and those chairs for a breastwork here. Yes, the clock too. Are all your weapons loaded? Where's Dick? Dick!"

The black boy came running from his post

above. "They're comin', Mastah Thomas!" he cried. "A whole lot of 'em with a big log, and the man on horseback behind 'em."

"All right," said the bailiff sternly. "Put out the candles, Buckaloo. Now, gentlemen, as soon as they break through, let 'em have it. We've got to break up this gang, once for all."

There was a tramp of heavy feet without. "Stand clear!" shouted the hoarse tones.

The battering-ram struck with terrific force. The door leaped from its hinges and fell in the hall with a clang. Over it poured a stream of ghastly figures.

"Fire!" muttered the bailiff.

Our weapons thundered together. I discharged both barrels of my Manton. Mr. Stockton's pistols cracked, then catching up my rifle, he emptied that as well. Buckaloo, swearing fiercely, did the same with shotgun and flintlock.

There was a chorus of shouts and cries. The attacking column was withered. Men staggered and fell, rose to hands and knees, and crawled away, moaning.

Outside a raging horseman was visible in the moonlight. The bailiff fired twice with his heavy

pistols. Pine Owl reeled. He stiffened himself—then galloped away, lurching horribly in his saddle.

An awful silence reigned. In the darkness we could hear the thumping of each other's hearts.

“Dick, light the candles,” said the bailiff softly. “Buckaloo, help me fix that door the best way we can. Gentlemen, Pine Owl and the boys from the Barrens will never trouble this county again.”

XXII

THE LAST TRICK

FROM the chaos of the back hall I hurried to the front of the house. Bram still crouched, brooding, in the windsor-chair. He did not lift even his eyes as I strode past him.

In the library Ferriss and Sue sat side by side, their arms about each other. Jerry stood facing the door.

"Who's theyah?" he demanded valiantly. "That you, Mastah Henry?"

"Yes, yes. We've driven them off, Ferriss. It's all over."

"Is—is he safe, Squire?" exclaimed Sue.

"Lem? Safe and sound. None of our side is hurt—except Mr. Stockton. He has a few face scratches."

Ferriss looked up at me. I noticed the pitiful droop of her mouth, and the dark circles under her eyes.

"The others?" she said. "The—other side?"

"Some of them are badly hurt, I think. We don't know whether or not any are killed. There's

nothing in sight, at any rate. They've taken their wounded and dead away—if there are any dead.”

“Oh, horrible!”

“Yes, but they brought it on their own heads. They were solemnly warned off. We were forced to fire upon them.”

“I know, but—oh! it's all upon my account. If it hadn't been for me, they'd never have come here. It's all my fault.”

“No, no. You've been misled all along by a clever scoundrel. Remember! they told you themselves they were after plunder—they didn't come for any other reason. Cousin,” I went on, “you must be worn out. Let Sue put you to bed. You can go home when you're rested to-morrow—or to-day—it must be nearly morning.”

She was too weary to protest. Indeed, she had been through an agony of terror and anguish that might well have turned her brain. I slipped my arm about her shoulders, and supported her to the very door of Sue's room. She gave me a long look. Then Sue closed the door softly behind her.

Dick was extinguishing the candles in the hall. It was almost daylight. Mr. Stockton and Hubbard were awaiting me.

“Sam has gone for our horses, Henry,” said the lawyer. “Now’s the time to finish up this business.” He brandished a handful of warrants. “You and I and Hubbard must be riding. Yes, and Bram, too.”

“Where are we going?”

“Everywhere—everywhere. What! I’ll send Dick down to the village to my clerk, Fithian. Fithian will see that the machinery of the law runs true. Of course, we’ll have to report all this fighting to the authorities. Fortunately I’m about the chief authority myself—in this particular cause—I and Hubbard. Are you ready there, Bramfield?”

My “cousin” got to his feet. He stretched himself stiffly. “Yes, sir,” he answered. His tone was grave, but free of resentment. “I’m ready. Let’s get through with it.”

In five minutes we were all booted and spurred. Sam brought the horses. We mounted and swept around the house. Several splashes of blood were distinctly visible upon the withering grass.

“Just so,” said the bailiff. “Some sick people in the swamp to-day, I guess.”

The sun rose out of the pines as we cantered sharply down the slope. In those same pines mur-

der had lately been hatching—perhaps ruffians were even then dragging their shattered limbs through the thickets.

Mr. Stockton seemed to be lost in thought. The bailiff, too, looked grim. I did not care to ask them our destination. However, I soon perceived that we were making toward Fairview township. Doubtless we would trap Lawrence Arnold, lurking like a wounded tiger in his den. We might even hope to overtake him on the way.

Bram glanced side-long at me from time to time. If I looked as I felt, my face was not encouraging; but when our horses fell to a walk, he reined beside me.

“I’ve been a cad, Hal,” he said. “I must have been crazy.”

I understood his character too well to believe that he was endeavoring to fend off punishment by this acknowledgment. He was not the man to cry for quarter. His words told of a genuine repentance, but I was in no position to answer him. He surveyed me ruefully, and fell back to his place.

We gained the Fairview turnpike and galloped along it. It was a glorious autumn morning. Silvery networks glistened in the grass beside the

road. The sky above the pines was blue as steel. A woodpecker called piercingly from a blasted oak.

It was the spot where the avenue to Fairview branched from the turnpike, yet we were passing it at a gallop.

"This is the place, Mr. Stockton," I called. "Aren't we going to Fairview?"

"Not yet—not yet, Henry," answered the lawyer over his shoulder. "We're after a craftier fox than Lawrence Arnold. No, no, it's the keystone of the arch we want. If we break the keystone, there won't be any arch. What! Come on, before he outwits us."

Amazed, I spurred my roan after him.

"But, Pine Owl!" I said, as we pounded along. "He must be the man we want."

"Yes, you're right, Henry—you're right. Pine Owl's the man—if he's alive. Yes, yes, if he's alive."

"But isn't Arnold Pine Owl?"

"No—he isn't," returned the lawyer. "You'll see—one moment."

We turned sharply into a sandy path. It was the back road to Chestnut Farms. I caught the lawyer's eye, and a dreadful suspicion seized me.

“Good Heavens!”

Mr. Stockton pursed his lips.—“I won’t swear to it—not yet, but——” He nodded significantly.

We dismounted a hundred yards below the house.

“Hold the horses, Mr. Bram, if you please,” directed Mr. Stockton. “You won’t want to take part in this, I suppose. Now, then, gentlemen!”

We hastened forward on foot. The house faced us stark in the morning light. Its unpainted wood-work showed ghastly—its gaunt windows were eloquent of misery.

We stole forward cautiously, but nowhere was there a sign of life. The bailiff pointed to a dark blotch on the lowest step of the porch. There was another on the very doorsill.

He turned the knob. The door yielded, and we slipped into the house. The blotches on the doorstep might have prepared me for anything, yet the poverty of the place appalled me.

As we passed into the nearest room Hubbard uttered an exclamation. He crossed the room at a stride and threw back a shutter. The light poured in and I stared about. Pine Owl had been overtaken at last.

Bowed over a centre table sat John Dayton.

His square shoulders were drooped and his head hung forward, but the dead hand still grasped the pen with which he had been writing his last effort at deception—writing in the same quaint characters in which, although disguised, he had indited Pine Owl's warnings to me.

Hubbard read the note in a low tone.

“To my dear daughter:—Forgive me for the shock your finding me here will cause you. I had intended to die in the chestnut-grove—I shot myself there but feared discovery before death came, so I have dragged myself to the house. You may find some bloodstains where I leaned against the rails. I die by my own hand—life has become insupportable to me. Poverty and infirmi—”

He had died as he wrote.

The bailiff looked up. “He must have climbed the fence with both my bullets through his lungs,” he said. “Well, gentlemen, that's what I call going out game to the last.”

We stood silent. What an iron nature had been John Dayton's!—and how distorted! What duplicity—and skill—must have been his, to have kept his very daughter in ignorance that he himself was the master of the plot in which she had, until lately, fancied herself a leader!

A pang went through me as I looked on the dead man. He had been killed while trying to oust a usurper—little as he deemed me such in law—from his own property.

“My God!” I said hoarsely. “I might have prevented all this. If I’d only dreamed Pine Owl was Mr. Dayton, I would have given up Morvan. Mr. Stockton, Hubbard, I want to tell you something. Gentlemen, I have no right to——”

“Tut! tut! Mr. Morvan!” interrupted the bailiff sternly. “Contain yourself, sir. It’s very natural on your part, I’m sure—your sorrow on account of the family. Yes, it’s natural—but be a man, sir. Bear in mind *I* shot John Dayton, and I shot him not because he made an assault on your property, but because he’s the highwayman I’ve been after for two years past. Yes, sir—he robbed Mr. William Hancock on the Clayville Road very lately, and has been mixed in a dozen other matters I could name. I got hold of the proofs not long since, but his life’s been forfeit to the law these two years or more. Yes, sir, if I hadn’t killed him, he’d have had to swing. I guess it’s better as it is.”

“A hundred times!” said Mr. Stockton.

“You’ve nothing to blame yourself for, Henry—nothing. Now, for Arnold’s,” he went on. “Hubbard, you take charge here, will you? Make everything right for the inquest. What! Luckily William Hancock is coroner just now, and he’s not likely to see beyond the end of his nose. But arrange things so he won’t have to look too closely. You understand?”

“Yes, sir. This is in my line,” responded the bailiff. “It’ll be all right.”

Bram was holding the horses below the house. He gave us a questioning look.

“He’s dead,” said the lawyer. “He’s killed himself.”

Bram paled. He gazed from one to the other. “Dead? John Dayton—killed *himself*!”

“Yes—dead by his own hand, sir,” responded the lawyer firmly. “He has committed suicide—suicide, Mr. Bram. A most unfortunate occurrence. A party of gentlemen—his nearest relatives and neighbors—come to pay Mr. John Dayton a morning call—to ascertain if he has by chance been made the object of a similar attack to that just directed against the main branch of the family. They find him dead—yes, and a note in his own hand

stating that he was tired of life, and had resolved to end it. The coroner can't fail to find a verdict of suicide upon that note."

"Ha!"

"Yes, Mr. Bram. A very lamentable affair. An ending greatly to be deplored for so old—and ah!—so well-connected a man. Very regrettable—a suicide."

XXIII

EVIL SPIRITS

IN fifteen minutes Mr. Stockton, Bram and I rode up the avenue to Fairview. Several servants hastened out.

"Is your master at home?" demanded Mr. Stockton.

"No, sah," answered one of them. "He ain't been home since yistiddy fo'noon."

"Ah, he hasn't? Is your mistress in?"

"Yas, sah. Miss Kitty's here, but Ah don't guess she's dressed yit."

"Mr. Bram," said the lawyer. "I'll have to ask you to go in and make sure our man isn't here. On your honor, if you please—on your honor." Bram nodded. "And be careful he doesn't pistol you from a closet," cautioned the lawyer. "I dare say he doesn't love you just now."

Tossing his reins to a darkey, Bram ran into the house. From the room in the second story I so well remembered presently came a joyful cry.

"Damn his effrontery!" I muttered. Mr. Stockton gave me a quizzical glance.

Bram ran out. "He isn't here," he declared. "I'm sure of it."

"Where can he be?"

"May be at Bat Merry's," suggested Bram. "If his leg's smashed, it would be too far for him to try for Mary Pedersen's."

"Very likely—very likely. We won't need you any more, Mr. Bram. Tell everything—everything, mind!—to *her*." He nodded toward the house. "Make a clean breast of it, Mr. Bram. Then, if you please, get her to ride over to Morvan within an hour, and break the news of Mr. Dayton's suicide to Miss Ferriss. She's her friend—she'll do it best. Let her break the news."

"Very well, sir."

"Go, and sin no more, Bramfield, if I may say so."

"I'll have a try for it, Mr. Stockton. Hal, I'll have a try."

"Now, go along," said the lawyer. "I dare say you'll have to explain to your wife why you didn't keep your engagement with her last night."

"His wife!" I fairly shouted.

"Eh? What! Yes, his wife." The lawyer chuckled. "That's the bit of gossip I promised

to tell you when I got back from Trenton. Dr. Garrett married them the day Baker and Sue were married. Miss Katharine—Mrs. Bram now—was at church with Miss Dayton—didn't you see her? They were married immediately afterward—in the rectory. Miss Ferriss was bridesmaid, and I was witness—Mrs. Garrett and I. Bram swore me to secrecy.”

“Bram, why didn't you tell me?” I exclaimed.

“Well, by Gad! Henry, it was a secret, d'ye see? Lawrence would have raised the very deuce, if he'd known it. He wanted a rich husband for Kitty—not a poor rip like me. We'd cared for each other a long time. I sounded Lawrence on the thing once—he was ready to fight me on the spot. No, no, we stood it as long as we could, and then we stole away and got married. We had to keep it a secret.”

“I've had ghastly suspicions about you—and your wife,” I said. “I was doing you gross injustice.”

“Did you know something about it?” He gazed at me and perhaps guessed what I had seen. He flushed, but laughed good-naturedly. “Well, well, Hal, I didn't know anyone was about. No,

by Gad!" He stopped, and sighed heavily. "Poor little Kitty! the worst is coming for us now."

A magnanimous idea flashed into my mind—I had almost come to believe I was really Henry Morvan.

"The worst isn't coming, Bram," I said. "Not if I have anything to do with it."

"And you have," said Mr. Stockton, "and you have."

We took the crossway to the postroad, and moved down it toward the village. My brain was in a whirl—dead men and climbing lovers, the hideous faces of the Pine Owls, and the wistful mouth of Ferriss Dayton danced before my mind's eye.

I was too far gone in my desperate game to retreat. "Mr. Stockton," I said between gallops, "why can't I buy up Arnold's mortgages? I'd like to give Fairview to Bram and his wife—and let them make a new start in life."

"You can, Henry, you can. The idea does you credit. I can lay hold of every one of those mortgages at a day's notice."

"Then we'll do it."

"If Arnold isn't at Merry's," said the lawyer during the next breathing space, "there's only one

other place to try—and that's not the old Swede's cabin either."

"I know—at Letty Miller's cottage—behind us."

"Exactly. It would be like his mean soul to go crawling to her when he was in trouble. What!"

At the tavern we tied our horses to the rails, and walked quickly into the public room. The place was empty of loungers. Only Merry himself, smaller and paler-faced than usual, bustled from behind the bar.

"Good-morning, gentlemen. Good-morning, Squire Morvan. Good-morning, Squire Stockton. A beautiful day for the time of year. You're riding early this morning, gentlemen. Will the Gloucester Hunt be down this way to-day? What can I serve you this morning, gentlemen? I've just got in a keg of oak-stored Kentucky—or if you haven't had breakfast yet, some roast' oysters or a couple of quails would——"

The lawyer had been watching him narrowly. "Merry," he interrupted without ceremony, "which is Mr. Arnold's room?"

The landlord shrank as if he had received a blow. "Sir," he stammered, "I don't know what

—Mr. Arnold? I haven't seen him for two or three days, I'm sure. He isn't here, sir."

Mr. Stockton touched him on the shoulder with a folded paper. "Come, come, my man, he's here, and I want to see him. Don't lie to us, man. This may be a hanging matter for you. See here!" He slapped open a warrant. "'One Bartholomew Merry'—do you understand? You're under arrest."

The fellow's terror was pitiful to see. His pale face turned a chalky white, and he gazed at us with stricken eyes.

"My God! I'm a ruined man! Gentlemen, don't be hard on me. I didn't mean——"

"That'll do, Merry. Where's Lawrence Arnold?"

"This way, sir,—this way. He's hurt bad, gentlemen. I swear I didn't have anything to do with last night's work. I wasn't in the thing at all, Squire. His leg's smashed, but it ain't fatal, I'm sure. He crept in the back way just before sun-up. I couldn't stop him—I swear I couldn't. I told him he'd ruin me. Here in this room, gentlemen. I didn't want to have anything to do with it" The man was quite beside himself.

We entered an obscure kennel under the very eaves of the house. Lawrence Arnold glared at us from a pile of pillows. The lawyer began without preliminaries.

"You're caught, Arnold. The game's up."

The other pressed his lips together as if defying us to do our worst. Then the hopelessness of his situation broke his dogged temper.

"I know it," he responded sullenly. "The game's up as far as I'm concerned, may be."

"As far as any of you are concerned," snapped Mr. Stockton. "John Dayton is dead."

"Dayton dead?"

"Yes—suicide."

"Suicide!"

"I said so. He left a note to prove it. You haven't been fortunate enough to—to commit suicide—quite. What! The pitcher that went too often to the well! Arnold, your gang is broken to pieces—including yourself."

"Curse it!" said the other. "My leg's in splinters. That's your doing, Morvan. My God! did you use a cannon?"

"Serves you right, sir," said the lawyer. "Serves you right! But Mr. Morvan and I are

willing to give you one more chance. You must fly the State to-night—to-night, you understand?"

"What!" He started up eagerly, but fell back with a groan. "You're only baiting me—I can't travel with this leg."

"Yes, you can. What's more, you must. You can go by post, once your leg's properly set. Bat Merry goes with you. Yes, you will, Merry, or you go to gaol. You must both be in Gloucester before daylight to-morrow, and across the river into Pennsylvania before sunrise. If not—you won't get off under a life sentence."

"Don't I know it! I'll go," said Arnold with savage resignation. "But what's to become of Fairview, and Kitty?"

"Fairview's been yours only in name for two years past. I know that as well as you do—very likely, better—very likely, better. Mr. Henry Morvan will hold all the mortgages in a day or two. We intend to foreclose, sir, *instantly*—that's the very word, *instantly*."

"I don't know what'll become of poor little Kitty. She won't have a cent in the world—and I'm an outlaw."

"Your sister is now Mrs. Bram Morvan," I

said. "Fairview will be assigned to her and her husband."

Arnold stared from me to the lawyer. "I must be getting feverish," he muttered. "What did you say? Kitty——"

"Miss Arnold was married to Bram several days since."

"What!" He almost leaped from the bed. "Damn his traitor's soul! He's married her?"

"Yes," said Mr. Stockton, "and Mr. Morvan means to give him charge of Fairview—in trust, of course."

Arnold was stunned. "The only man who gets anything out of all this is Bram," he said bitterly. "Why, Morvan, don't you know he plotted to oust you—yes, and meant to tar and feather you, too?"

The lawyer answered for me. "So he did—so he did; but he had a change of heart in time. Henry, it was the same night they beat Buckaloo—John Dayton and Arnold and their men. Bram knew what was on the *tapis*, of course. I think old Mary Pedersen's diabolical scheme about Miss Ferriss had very nearly brought him to his senses, and then the Buckaloo affair was the final touch. Bram realized that he wasn't designed for a villain.

I've no doubt he wrestled with his better self all night, for he woke me up in the Washington Room before dawn that morning, and told me all he knew. But he was really only a tool—a tool of yours, Arnold—and you were a tool of John Dayton's, perhaps. What!”

The wounded man only groaned.

“Bram hadn't played a very honorable part,” continued Mr. Stockton. “You're right, Mr. Arnold, not a very honorable part—and I was afraid he wouldn't be true with me. So, although he stayed a spy in the enemy's camp, I didn't trust him far. I thought that what he told me might only be meant to lead us deeper into the toils. That's the reason I didn't mention his confidences to you, Henry, and that's why I had Hubbard place him under arrest—to see if there was anything further to be learned. But there wasn't—there wasn't.”

“Damn him!” repeated Arnold with fervor.

“I believe he was in a fair way toward damnation, sir. But his own conscience—he'd grown very fond of Miss Katharine, Mr. Arnold—his conscience and your sister saved him on the brink of his own destruction.”

Mr. Stockton wagged his finger at the injured

man. "So you're an exile from to-morrow, Arnold—and you, too, Merry. My bailiff will scour the State for you in the morning—and the writ will run indefinitely, I promise you that, sir. If either of you ever returns to the Jerseys, you're lost—mind! I advise you to drive to Gloucester, and cross the river there—or better yet, get a sloop in the marshes, and sail right across the bay to Delaware."

"I've got a light rig, Squire," said Merry servilely. "Yes, and I know where I can get a boat, too. That'd be easier on his leg. We'll be clear by morning all right."

"Good-by, Mr. Arnold," I said. "I wish you no ill-luck."

"I've had enough already," groaned the other. "Good God, Morvan! a roundshot couldn't have smashed me worse than your bullet's done."

"I've some matters to see to, Arnold," said Mr. Stockton, "then I'll come back and set your leg—do it myself. It won't do to trust any regular practitioner—for your own sake, you understand—he might talk. I learned to be a bit of a surgeon in the Navy—I'll wager I'll make a neat job of your broken bones. What! Afterward, you'll have

all day to arrange your business affairs—you and Merry.”

Outside the tavern, Mr. Stockton heaved a sigh of satisfaction. “A clean sweep, Henry—a clean sweep.”

“How about Mary Pedersen?” I asked.

“I’d forgotten her. I’ll send Hubbard down with a *posse* this afternoon. I fancy the bird has flown, though. Well, I’ll get Fithian to lend me a hand with Arnold’s leg. He and I set Dick’s arm only last year—the rascal wouldn’t let anyone else touch him. You’d better get back to Morvan—you’ll be needing sleep. I’ll come up as soon as I can. I dare say I’ll do as well with that kneecap as any sawbones hereabouts.”

Baker and Sue met me in the hall of the manor-house.

“Has Miss Ferriss been told, Sue?—about her father?”

“Yes, Squire,” said the girl. “Miss Arnold——” She stopped in embarrassment. “I mean Mrs. Morvan—Mr. Bram’s wife—she’s with her now.”

“Is Miss Ferriss much overcome?”

“Well, sir, she didn’t take it so hard—not as

hard as some folks might. I kind a guess she thought he might kill himself sometime—he's been right queer a long time, they say."

"Give Miss Ferriss my love when you get a chance, Sue."

"Yes, sir, I will. Squire, she was sayin' a while ago she hoped you wouldn't think too hard of her."

I repeated the words to myself as I sought my room. Think hardly of her? God save the mark! what would she think of me when she should know what a living lie my life was? When? What if she should never know! The idea warmed itself in my brain.

All that day—since the moment when I had seen John Dayton dead in his ruined farmhouse—I had been nerving myself to tell Ferriss the truth—to reveal to her my hideous deception.

I had deceived a whole county. I had furnished the opportunity for the law, in the person of Hubbard, to settle its claim against John Dayton—and John Dayton was her father! I had kept Ferriss too long from her rightful heritage. But the play was played out. The comedy had become a tragedy—I would end it before it destroyed her

as well as myself, although for my own destruction I had come to care little.

I say, until I had returned to the manorhouse—until I had stood outside the door of her chamber and thrilled at the thought of her presence so near me—I had thought only of confessing the truth, let my fate be what it might.

But now a new thought overwhelmed me. Why not keep my secret? Surely I could continue to be Henry Morvan without incurring the least suspicion. I had overcome all difficulties already—the future could not fail to be plain sailing.

Would it not be fairer to her to let matters take their course? A way of atonement lay at hand—a way whereby I could return her property without letting her become aware that she had ever been robbed of it. That way was marriage!

I felt the blood run hot in my veins at the thought. Yes, that was the way—if she could but be persuaded. The way of a dastard—of a double-dyed villain—the way of a very fiend!

The morning sunlight flooded the room, but I caught myself muttering, as if to a familiar in the dark: “I love her! I love her!”

XXIV

SURRENDER

THE next day I sprang from my bed more lightly than I had done since my first day at Morvan.

By eleven o'clock of the preceding morning, an intelligent coroner's jury—with Hubbard's help—had brought in a verdict of suicide in the case of John Dayton, Gentleman. In the afternoon the funeral had taken place—it had seemed best to Mr. Stockton and me that there should be no delay. Ferriss had attended, leaning, heavily veiled, on my arm, as we buried her father in the Morvan lot at the old cemetery. Baker and Sue, Bram and his wife, Mr. Stockton and his clerk, and half a dozen of our friends had been the only others present at the grave-side.

Ferriss had borne it all bravely. Only when Dr. Garrett read the solemn words: "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust," had she lost her self-control for a little.

On the way back to Morvan, although we drove together in the family coach, I had not ventured

to disturb her. Best let healing Time do its work. How much Ferriss guessed of her father's action I did not know. Perhaps she had begun to see a little of the truth, the day we had drunk tea at Pole Tavern—when she had bade me leave her that she might think. At all events, John Dayton was not a father she could mourn long.

That same afternoon Hubbard, with Buckaloo and four or five others, had raided Lost Hollow. Where the cabin had stood, they found only a pile of still-burning embers. Mary Pedersen's body perhaps lay beneath the glowing ruins; but no one troubled to drag them apart to make sure—the fire was even more satisfactory than a coroner's jury.

Some time after nightfall it had been rumored in the village that Lawrence Arnold and Bat Merry had been seen driving westward in great haste. Mr. William Hancock had hurried with the report to the Supreme Court bailiff, and had suggested pursuing the fugitives. The bailiff had instantly announced his intention of doing so—the first thing in the morning.

All these things came to my mind with a rush—I bounded from my bed. My ring was answered by Sam.

"How's Miss Ferriss this morning, Sam?"

"Ah dunno, sah—she's gone."

"Gone!" I shouted.

"Ah mean she's lef' the house, sah," replied the boy hurriedly. "Her and Jerry went off a ridin', somers."

"If you give me another shock like that, I'll have you hanged at a yard-arm," I assured him. "Where's she gone?"

"Ah cain't tell yo', Mastah Henry. Betsey, she got her some breakfus' early. She took Jerry and ride off. Dad blim that Jerry! He nevah tole me nothin'. I'll lam him, when I git him, suah!"

"Which way did they go?"

"Ah tried to watch 'em from the front po'ch—I knew you'd want to know 'bout her. But they jest nachully melted in the woods. Miss Baker, she tole me to tell you she heard her say somethin' 'bout goin' for a good long ride."

I finished my dressing in short order. As for breakfast—whether or not I ate any that morning I do not know to this day. Certainly I did not taste it.

On my best horse I swept down the slope, rounded the foot of the lake, and plunged into the

woods at the point where Sam had seen Ferriss and Jerry disappear.

Once in the forest, I pulled my roan to a walk, and began to put into play some of the woodcraft I had learned along the Missouri. I longed for Link—for a week I had almost forgotten the faithful fellow's existence. His powers as a tracker would have been worth his weight in gold to me at that moment.

If Ferriss had really only gone for a good ride, she could find it in the five-mile stretch between Morvan and the bay. If she had left the manor-house so early for some more subtle purpose, a turn to the left, after entering the woods, would place half of West Jersey before her.

If she had taken the latter course, where could she have gone? Not to her own home at Chestnut Farms—that place of horror. Nor yet to the cemetery in the village—she had none of that morbid sentiment that leads a certain sort to languish over a new-made grave. She might have betaken herself to the couple at Fairview, yet her brother's friend, as well as husband, had been too nearly concerned in all her miseries to allow of her greatly relishing such company.

Setting aside all other places as impossible, I held a course straight to the southwest—toward the bay.

A pheasant roared up from a clump of chinkapins, while I was still some paces distant. The bird's wildness was beyond the ordinary—it must recently have been disturbed. The ground here was harder than is usual in the Barrens, and I could find no trace of hoof-prints, but the pheasant's flight made me keep on hopefully.

A couple of hundred yards further on, a growth of snaky briars scored deep scratches across my boots. I dismounted, getting some unpleasant stabs for my pains, and searched about among the brambles. It was as I had hoped—I discovered not one but three or four shreds of cloth in the grip of the jealous thorns. They had been torn from Ferriss' riding-habit—already pitiful enough, God knows!

It was now pretty certain that she had sought the bay shore, and in that part of the coast—as I had learned from Sam's directions—there was but one spot whither she would be likely to go. The bay line for ten miles north and south was a wilderness of salt marshes and devious water channels.

At two points only, ridges of pine-crowned loam thrust firm fingers into the bay. One of these ridges ended in Lost Hollow. The other—it had no name by Sam's account—was the place where Ferriss might be found. I pushed straight for it.

It was no easy matter picking a way through a forest without a trail and through a country strange to me, but at last I led my horse up the ridge. At sight of me, a bluejay perched in a solitary hickory began to utter its taunting cry. The challenge was answered by a series of discordant notes—notes that no bird—not even a bluejay—could have fathered.

Jerry, his back toward me, was sitting on a fallen pine, replying in kind.

“Ya, ya, ya! I hear yo’, yo’ ole tomcat. I s’pect yo’ve scairt more’n a hundred squirrels ’way from me in yo’ time. If ’twa’n’t you, ’twas some of yo’ kin. Yo’ needn’t holler at me, dad blim yo’! Yo’re makin’ a heap o’ noise, but yo’ don’t know who’s a-walkin’ up here behind me, but Ah do.” The rascal had seen me a hundred yards away.

I wasted no time with him. “Where is she?” I demanded.

“Jest ovah the ‘neck’, sah,” he replied. “She was theyah a liddle while ago, Mastah Henry.”

I added my roan to the two horses he was already holding and hurried across the bridge. Ferriss was standing at the very edge of the river-bank, her hand at her eyes, looking over the water. There was little or no wind, and the sunlight sparkled back from a bay as smooth as glass. So intent was she that, although my eyes had at first been all for her, they were forced to follow the direction of her glance.

Within plain sight—almost within hailing distance—an oyster sloop lay becalmed. The tide was drifting her westward off shore, but she moved only by inches.

Of her crew of two men, one ran busily from helm to jib, and back to mainsail sheet, on the alert for every breath of wind. The other, large and broadshouldered, sat motionless in the stern.

Presently, as the sail flapped listlessly over, I saw that the larger man had one of his legs stretched stiffly on the deck—a leg swathed in voluminous bandages.

As I gazed, a breeze came up from seaward, jib and mainsail filled, the stiff-legged man seemed to settle into his place—I could almost hear his oath of relief—and with the smaller man at the helm,

the sloop stood fair for the Delaware shore. Lawrence Arnold and Bat Merry had sailed away.

Ferriss turned, her hand still at her eyes. Her slim body was framed by the brown water—her mouth drooped wistfully. She stared at me as if I were an apparition.

“You!”

“Yes, certainly—I.”

“Oh!” she said. “Why have you followed me?”

“Why not? I’d follow you around the world.”

She silenced me with her proud gesture. “I’ve just resolved to leave here,” she said, “to leave this part of the country. I haven’t any more right to live on here than they”—she motioned toward the fast-vanishing sloop,—“than those wretched men have.”

“But why should you leave—leave Morvan, and me?”

“Cousin,” she said, “my father has died by his own hand. Oh! was it only yesterday? It seems a year. My father has killed himself—I plotted to ruin you.” She clenched her hands passionately. “Yet I’m living upon your bounty. It kills me—it kills me! I’ll beg my way about the country, first.”

She was not humble, as I had a right to expect. On the contrary, she seemed fairly to defy me. I caught her wrist with a temper quite as high as her own.

"By Heaven, madam. You *shall* live upon my bounty—for as long as I like."

For a moment she faced me, frowning. All at once she hid her face in her hands.

"Oh," she wailed. "Oh, if my mother could be here!"

I was in a passion of regret. "Cousin! My dear lady! Ferriss!" I kissed the shielding hands.

"Oh, no," she said. "Oh, no."

"Why not?" I cried. "Ferriss, I love you with all my heart."

"How can you, after——"

"Ah, but I do. Ferriss, will you marry me?"

She stared at me with bated breath. "Marry you? I? Never—never."

"I'll make you love me."

"I do now," she said simply. "But your wife? It would be monstrous. My father!—he was buried only yesterday, too."

"Yes, but you've said yourself it seems a year since. If we love each other, isn't that enough?"

The gray eyes looked me through. "Yes—it is enough," she said, and burst out sobbing.

I took her by the shoulders with both hands.

"You'll marry me?"

"Yes."

"When? Now? To-day?"

"Yes—if you want me very much."

XXV

TOM BELL

OFTEN since that day I have wondered if the sight of her, weeping, blushing, and trembling before me, would alone have served to arouse in me the honor I had almost strangled.

I had gained the point toward which, whether consciously or not, I had been aiming ever since I had first seen the veiled Lady of the Spur in Pole Tavern. That proud head was bent—the gray eyes were tear-wet—for me. Yet even as I was about to draw her close, heart to heart and mouth to mouth, a horror of myself turned me cold.

Would I have confessed all, without other prompting than that of her lovely innocence? I vow I do not know. By some High Grace I was not left to decide for myself. For as I turned my sick eyes from the girl to the forest behind her, a man stood up in the middle of a clump of cedars, as if summoned by art-magic. It was Link!

For a moment my startled gaze met his—to my bewildered mind he was like an apparition from another world—then he sank back into cover.

I held Ferriss from me, and looked at her long

—so long that the hopelessness in my eyes grew into her own, and the red of her cheeks turned slowly to white.

“Ferriss,” I said thickly.

“Yes,” she whispered. “What is it? Are you ill—dear?”

It took all my manhood to go on. “Not in body, but in soul. Listen—and don’t think me mad. I speak the soberest truth. God knows what injury I’ve done you!—I pray it be but little. But I’ve loved you so much that I’ve been in a dreadful dream.”

She laid her hand an instant against my cheek. “I don’t understand,” she said. “I know I love you.”

“Don’t make it too hard for me,” I begged.

I stepped a pace from her, and drew a paper from my breast—the hand-bill proclaiming one, Tom Bell, highwayman.

“Read that! Then look—look at *me!*”

When she had read, she gazed at me uncomprehendingly.

“Do you understand?” I said dully.

“It describes a man who must look ridiculously like you. But what has such a resemblance to do with——”

“A resemblance!” I said, my tone dreary beyond all hope. “Miss Dayton, I *am* Tom Bell.”

“Henry!”

“No, no! I’m not Henry Morvan. I’m an impostor! I’m Tom Bell—the man who’s published there. Oh, I’ve fooled all the world, and could laugh at it, but I can’t persuade myself to fool you any longer.”

She made an inarticulate sound. “Listen,” I went on. “I’m gently born and bred, and my family was well known in East Jersey, years ago. But I was left an orphan at fifteen, with nobody but a guardian to look after me. No, let me go on.”

“Eight years ago I was a wild lad of twenty, and eight years ago I was convicted of robbing Sir Geoffrey Walton, the British ambassador to this country—robbing him by night at the pistol’s point. It’s useless to say I wasn’t guilty—every felon says as much. I was convicted and sentenced to be hanged. But at the eleventh hour I was pardoned. I was sent out of the State with orders never to return. I was only twenty.”

“A boy—a little boy!”

“In the West I met Henry Morvan—the real one. We grew to be great friends. He died in my

arms of prairie fever two months since. I came here. I intended only to give the proofs of his death to his lawyers, then to go into hiding in the marsh islands. Then I saw you, and the world changed for me."

"And for me," she said.

"I've played the villain, but Henry Morvan had told me that Bram was the heir. In his last illness, he'd forgotten you and your father. Morvan lamented to me that Bram should inherit the property. When I took Morvan's name I didn't dream I was harming anyone but Bram. Afterward, I found it was you, but I couldn't give it up—it and you."

She made a sudden peremptory gesture. "You! Tom Bell, the highwayman? I don't believe it."

Again I put my hand to my breast. "You've seen the picture of Henry Morvan's father, in the library of the manorhouse? Then look at this one of Henry Morvan himself." I thrust a miniature into her fingers. "Compare that with your recollection of his father's picture—then compare both with me."

She stared at the miniature. The face of a young man smiled gravely up at her—a face like

mine at first glance, yet upon close inspection, very different.

I saw incredulity change to wonder as she gazed. Then wonder grew to fear, and fear to conviction. And then I could look no more, but stood with hanging head.

After what seemed a very long time, I felt a timid hand upon my arm. "Dear—I don't believe it."

"It's true."

"Oh, you may be Tom Bell—a name's nothing—but a highwayman, never!"

"Ferriss! Your saying that will always be a comfort to me—wherever I am."

She gave a little frightened cry. "You're not going away?"

"I must."

"You refuse to marry me, then?"

"Angel!" I cried. "You don't know what you're saying. A convicted highwayman marry the heiress of Morvan! The law forbids it. Besides, you must hate me at this moment for what I've done."

"You know I don't. Stay, and be the Squire of Morvan—with me. Or if you go, I shall go with you."

"No," I said. "I love you too well to shame you."

At that moment Link's voice, very low and penetrating, sounded from the cedar thicket.

"Captain! captain!"

Ferriss faced the sound, her eyes wide.

"What is it, Link?" I demanded.

"Four men, with guns, comin' up the 'neck'. Too quiet about it. Saw 'em put fresh caps on, too. Looks bad."

Apathy—a dreary indifference—held me motionless.

"Very well," I said.

"But, Captain, I tell you it looks bad." His voice took a hurried note. "Here they come. Run this way for your horse, Captain—I'll hold 'em back a minute. Run for the horses—you and the lady! You can make the island by to-morrow morning."

"Yes, yes!" cried Ferriss. "Run—run! With me!" She had actually seized my arm and was hurrying me toward the forest.

I came to a halt, and fell a pace from her. "No, no. Life's not so sweet to me that I'll spoil yours."

Four armed men came swiftly onto the river-bank. Mr. William Hancock, two freeholders of Morvan village, and last, Evans, the landlord of Pole Tavern. At sight of him I knew the game was up!

“Stand!” cried Mr. Hancock very pompously.

Now that the blow had fallen, I felt a real relief. I very nearly laughed in his face.

“Hoity-toity! What’s all this?” I demanded. “Mr. Hancock, why this Prætorian Guard? Don’t you see in whose presence you are, sir?”

“In the presence of a damned highwayman!” exclaimed Evans.

“Hold your tongue, fellow,” I said, very stern. “You’re in the presence of your betters, my man. Mr. Hancock, are you blind that you don’t see a lady before you?”

The old gentleman hurriedly doffed his hat, and bowed to Ferriss. His motion was followed respectfully by the two villagers, and sullenly by Evans.

“Your pardon, Miss Dayton,” said Mr. Hancock. “You’re very humble servant, ma’am. The execution of my duty must be my excuse—yes, my official duty. Very painful duty, too, Miss Dayton.”

“Mr. Morvan—ah—*sir*, your pardon, also, if a mistake’s been made. But we’ve been informed—most convincing testimony’s been brought forward—in fact, *sir*, it’s been asserted that you’re not Mr. Henry Morvan—no, ma’am, not the Squire of Morvan. It’s deposed on oath he’s Tom Bell, the notorious highwayman.”

“I’ll swear to it!” cried Evans. “There’s a scar over his right ear—under his hair. It’s where he was knifed by a drunken drover at Mullen’s above Trenton. I’d know him anywheres.”

Ferriss turned away. She stood very straight, her face held steadily toward the river.

“Don’t forget to say I got that wound trying to keep the drover from slitting *your* throat, Evans,” I said quietly.

“You *have* such a scar!” exclaimed Mr. Hancock. “Why, why! I’d hoped Mr. Morv—I’d hoped, *sir*, this all might be explained. Why, why! Do you admit you’re Tom Bell?”

“I do.”

“God bless my soul! This is terrible—terrible!” He tried to balance his firearm with one hand, while passing a great silk handkerchief over his face with the other. “The Squire of Morvan a highwayman? No, a highwayman the Squire of

Morvan? No, no—the Squire not the Squire, at all! Gentlemen, advance your pieces! Tom Bell, you're my prisoner. Do you surrender to the law?"

"I surrender, sir. Don't frighten Miss Dayton, if you please, gentlemen."

A harsh voice spoke behind the *posse*. "One minute!"

Unnoticed, Hubbard and Mr. Stockton had emerged from the woods.

"One minute," repeated Hubbard. "Mr. Hancock, you're arresting this gentleman on a specific cause, I suppose."

"Certainly, certainly," said the old gentleman. "On the only crime he's actually known to have been concerned in—the robbery of Sir Geoffrey Walton by force and violence."

"Then you can let him go," said the bailiff. "He didn't rob the Britisher. I did that job myself!"

I heard no more distinctly. While a very thunder of exclamations rang about my ears I sat down on a log, and buried my face in my hands. After a while, a soft arm stole about my neck, and clung there a blessed instant.

XXVI

A BEGINNING

FOR a long time, as it seemed to me, a babel of questions and explanations went on about me. I heard Hubbard's harsh tones, and Mr. Stockton's sharp ones, but what they said I did not heed. Then feet shuffled, and men's footsteps moved away from me. Presently the bluejay began to call jeeringly from the forest.

Then soft fingers fluttered over my hair, smoothing my crown as one consoles a hurt child, and touching with exquisite tenderness the long scar above my ear. I looked up at last.

Ferriss stood close, smiling down at me, her eyes very misty. Link had come from his cedar covert and was squatted on the grass at a little distance, regarding me with the eyes of a faithful hound. No one else was visible save Mr. Stockton, who was softly striding back and forth in front of me. He jerked himself to a halt, and shook his jury finger at me.

"By the Eternal! Henry," he began. "Henry? Confound it! you'll always be Henry to me.

You've been a victim, my poor boy, all these years. I always suspected there were high politics in that overhauling of Sir Geoffrey's dispatch-box. It may be necessary, in the broad sense, to resort to such stratagems—yes, necessary in the broad, but confoundedly hard in the narrow. What! It's a little beyond anything I've known since the first war."

I had reached up to take Ferriss' hand in mine. "A little," I agreed absently.

"More than a little—more than a little! Hubbard was employed direct by the Secretary of State to turn the trick. He'd strict instructions to throw suspicion on some one else, of course—if necessary. It *was* necessary! Sir Geoffrey made an international matter of it. Within a month Hubbard arrested—ah—young Tom Bell—*wild* young Tom Bell, if I may say so. No accusation was made that young Bell had ever been engaged in any other crime, but he was known as a reckless fellow—he had no family to come to his defense—he'd been seen in the neighborhood of the crime within the hour. What! Hubbard had no difficulty in getting the poor fellow convicted. Devilish impertinent, but devilish cool, I call it."

"I remembered his face the instant I saw him at

Morvan," I said. "I've been wondering ever since why he didn't proclaim me on the spot."

"He had the President's pardon in his pocket—pardon for what you never did. You see, a meddling jackanapes recognized you in Carlisle, and learned you were headed this way. The aforesaid jackanapes wrote the Governor, and *he* promptly published you in every corner of the State. His duty, as he thought."

"When Hubbard heard of it, he posted down to General Jackson. Andy himself ferreted out the whole affair in the secret archives at White House. By the Eternal! I've always been a Whig, but I'll turn Democrat if General Jackson ever stands for the Presidency again."

"Why didn't Mr. Hubbard let Henry have the pardon at once?" demanded an indignant voice beside me. "It was cruel—horribly cruel—of him to keep it back."

"Ha! ha!" laughed the lawyer. "Our young friend will always be 'Henry' to you, too, I see, Miss Dayton. Well, Hubbard held back the pardon in order that his plans to capture—to break up the Pine Owls mightn't be disturbed. Duty is first with Hubbard. He's a just man at bottom—

a just man, but his business has made him as hard as nails."

I nestled my cheek against Ferriss' palm. "I've no complaint to make," I said with a contented sigh.

Mr. Stockton's eyes twinkled. "I judge from what I see—only from what I see, of course—that you'll not be leaving Morvan for some time—Mr. Bell."

His words recalled me from my fools' paradise. I started to my feet. "Mr. Stockton," I said, "I thank you, sir, but your conclusion is wrong." I turned, and bowed to Ferriss, very low. "A beggar can't plead for such alms as your heart."

"What! A beggar?" exclaimed Mr. Stockton. "Thomson Bell, Esquire, a beggar? Nothing of the kind! Your Essex property has been in the custody of the Chancery Court during your—ah—eight years' vacation. Hubbard tells me you're worth at least five thousand dollars per annum, sir—five thousand dollars per annum, if a penny."

"What! I——" With a very shout of joy, I bounded to the crest of the ridge.

"Jerry! Jerry!"

The boy started up from the pine log where he had been nodding.

"Yas, sah."

"Jerry, ride like the devil to Dr. Garrett. Tell him to come up to Morvan at once. There's going to be a wedding, Jerry."

"Tell him to send up my clerk, too, Henry," cried the lawyer. "We'll need Fithian there to draw up the papers."

"Jump, now, Jerry!" I said.

The boy gaped upon me. "Who's a-goin' to git married, Mastah Henry?"

"Who? You young idiot! Miss Ferriss and I, of course."

"Glory be!" The boy hurled himself into the saddle at a single bound. His heels drumming the horse's sides, his arm going like a flail, he vanished in an instant.

I turned back to find Mr. Stockton laughing, and my dear lady both laughing and blushing.

"I—I'm not sure I'll consent, sir."

"Oh, Ferriss!" I cried in such dismay that she laughed and blushed more adorably than ever.

"Captain," said a voice at my shoulder.

I had clean forgotten Link. He had approached, and now stood regarding me with a look almost of reproach. "Captain, I came all the

way here to tell you it's a good time to come to the lodge while the hunting's still good. Too good to miss, Captain."

"Ah, Link," I said. "I've more important business on hand."

"But the slashes are fair black with ducks, Captain," he protested. "Geese, too—they go callin' over the place every mornin'." Something of the Indian's imagery showed in his words as his earnestness grew. "The wind sings in the reeds, Captain. I believe I heard a wolf howl two nights ago. Every day, just after sunset, a buck comes to the edge of the water, and challenges. The snow won't fly for a month yet, Captain, and the moon shines bright as day."

I touched Ferriss' arm. "He's speaking of my old hunting lodge in the marsh islands," I said. "Ferriss, wouldn't it be a good place to hide from the world a while, after—after to-night? The moon shines as bright as day! Our honeymoon there, dearest?"

She nodded, her cheeks white and red by turns.

"I'll be going," said Mr. Stockton. "I'll ride ahead of you, and get the papers in shape. Come along,—ah—Link. We're not needed here any longer. What!"

My Lady of the Spur and I rode homeward through the pines. A woodpecker called from a topmost bough. A dreamy haze wrapped the woodland.

"Sweet," I said. "I heard Mary Pedersen tell Bram that if he had you, he'd have Morvan—I don't understand."

She checked her horse. "Don't you know? Lord Berkeley's grant to John Morvan was on condition. If the owner is ever absent from the manor for twenty years together, or fails to spend at least one year upon it in every twenty, then it goes to the next heir. Your—Henry Morvan's—twenty years was nearly up."

"Oh, ho! If I—if Henry Morvan had been frightened away, then your father would have had Morvan at once."

She hung her head. "Yes."

"That's one of the reasons Arnold wanted to marry you—and Bram?"

Her head bent still lower. "Yes."

"But you're going to marry me, after all," I cried exultantly. I stopped and stared at her. "Ferriss, do you know I haven't—yet——"

The blood rushed to her cheeks. "I know," she whispered demurely.

Our horses were close together. I put both arms about her, and drew back her head until it rested upon my shoulder. The gray eyes looked into mine.

“Thank God!” I said fervently, “it isn’t too late to begin now.”

(THE END.)

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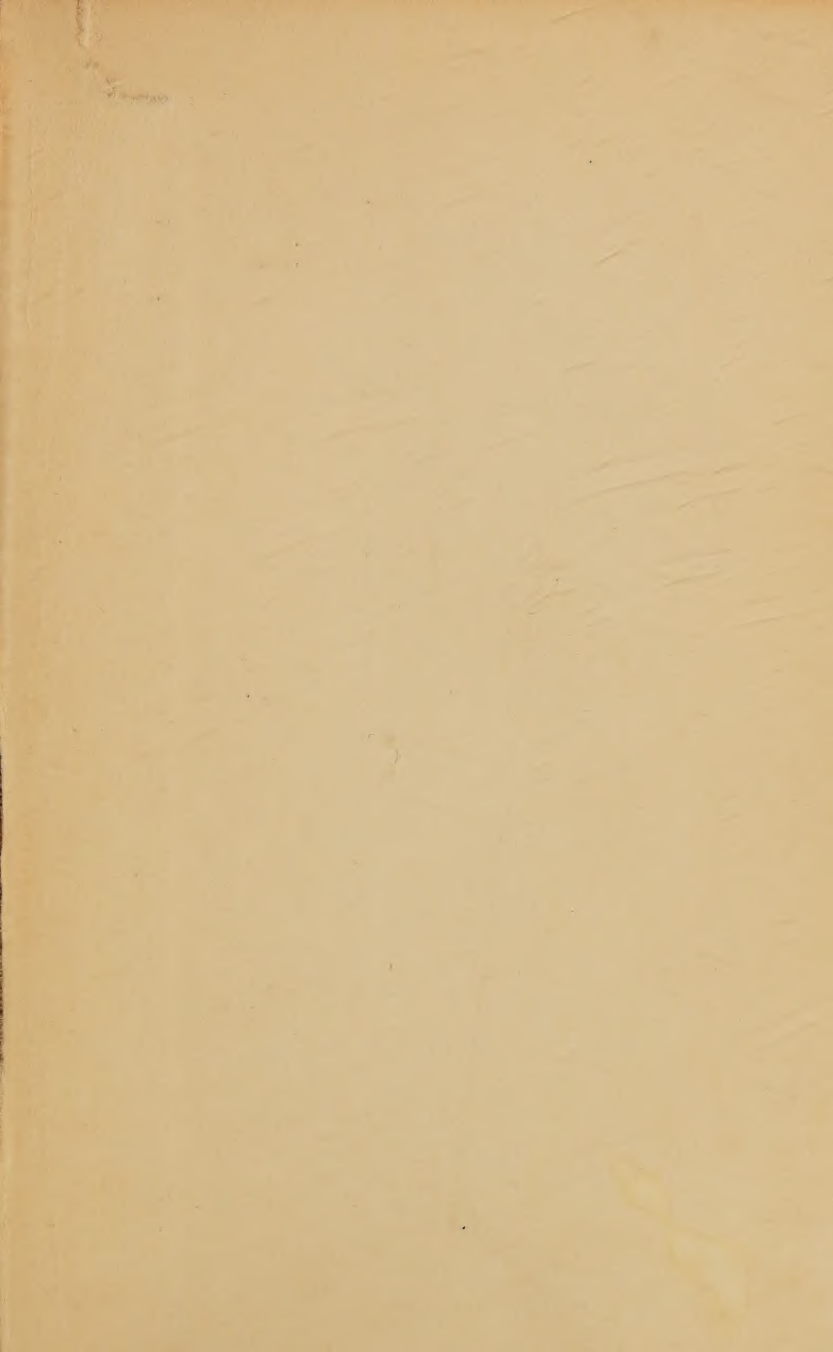
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